You are My Sunshine

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You are My Sunshine

by rosemaidenvixen

Summary

A few short months after being abandoned by James, Barbara and Jim have finally regained some stability; only to have their lives completely shattered by a single, inexplicable event. Now they have a devastating secret to keep, even if it means isolating themselves from everyone around them. But as the years go by, people are starting to ask questions, and their carefully crafted facade begins to crack.

Notes

This is my first serious, long term writing project so any feedback is appreciated. I'm going to try to update on a weekly basis, but if that gets to be too much it could change.

Five Part 1

Jim squeezed his eyes shut as his mom washed the last of the shampoo out of his hair.

“Alright, all done,”

Jim blinked the water out of his eyes, after the washing was done came the best part of taking a bath. He could just splash in the water, play with his toys, and his favorite part….

“Mom, can I use the bubble bath?”

Barbara started drying her hands on a towel “Of course, I’ll grab it,” She replied while reaching over and opening a cabinet. She pulled out a large purple bottle; but when she tried to pour some out into the cap nothing came out “I’m sorry Jim, it looks like we’re all out,”

Jim frowned, a bath without bubbles wasn’t going to be any fun.

Suddenly she perked up “I might have something different you can use,” Barbara reached way back into the open cabinet and pulled out a small paper bag “It’s called a bath bomb, you drop it in the water and it fizzes and changes color,” she took the bath bomb out of the bag and held it out for him to see.

Jim swam over to the edge of the tub to get a closer look. The bath bomb was grainy-looking, black colored, and about the size of an orange.

“What do you say kiddo?”

“I wanna try it!” taking a bath in colored water might be even more fun than bubbles.

Barbara set the bath bomb down on the toilet seat “Whenever you’re ready just drop it into the tub, now I’m going to go hang up the laundry, are you ok on your own?”

Jim nodded, once his mom left he could splash around without her telling him to not get water on the floor.

She stood up and smiled “Ok, shout if you need me,” she walked out of the room and shut the door behind her.

Jim didn’t waste any time, quickly he gathered up his bath toys and made sure they were all there; the wind up shark, navy boat, and all the Gun Robot action figures. Jim grinned, now that all his toys were ready, there was only one thing left. He swam over to the side of the tub and grabbed the bath bomb. It fizzled a tiny bit in his hand, black foam oozing up from around his fingers and dropping into the tub, making small spots of inky blackness in the clear water.

Jim stared at the black spots, mesmerized, if just a little bit of it could do something so awesome, the whole bath bomb was going to be the coolest thing ever! Jim dropped the bath bomb into the water, where it sank to the bottom with a kerplunk.

A pitch black cloud unfurled from around it as the bath bomb floated back up to the surface. The black spot spread rapidly, darkening the clear water. Jim slowly edged away from the growing blot until his back hit the side of the tub. It looked kind of spooky now that it was starting to spread. The oncoming darkness expanded until it filled the

whole tub.

For a moment Jim just sat there in the bath, the only sound permeating the silence the soft lapping of black water against the side of the tub. Then the bottom dropped out.

Jim floundered, desperately flapping his arms to try and keep on top of the water. Where had the bottom of the tub gone, normally he could stand up in it and not even get his elbows wet. He tried to stay afloat, but the water was so thick, it felt like maple syrup. Just his head was on the surface now, no matter how much he thrashed he couldn't stop from sinking. Jim opened his mouth to scream for help, but the water was too thick and deep; it sucked him down.

The bright light of the bathroom was still visible on the surface of the dark water above him, but no matter how desperately he flailed toward it, Jim couldn't get closer. He was still sinking, deeper and deeper into the blackness; and the light of the bathroom was getting smaller and smaller. Jim tried to cry but the water smothered him into silence. He wanted out of here, he wanted to be back in his house, he wanted his mom.

Now the light of the bathroom was just a tiny dot floating far away, Jim sobbed silently into the suffocating water and feebly tried to swim up towards it. It was too late, the light grew dimmer as Jim sunk lower; until it finally went out, leaving him alone in the blackness.

He couldn't even see his hands in front of him, he could barely feel the water surrounding him; and somehow, it was still getting darker. Jim cried soundlessly into the blackness, as he sunk down further, deeper and darker.

A few clips of a clothes hanger and the last of the towels was hung up on the rack to dry. Now that Barbara had finished hanging up the laundry, tomorrow it could be folded and put away. She let out a deep sigh. Balancing her residency, taking care of Jim, and doing the housework had never been easy, it got even harder after James left; but now, two months after he'd gone, it felt like she had finally established a rhythm.

Speaking of, Barbara glanced at her watch, Jim should be done playing around in the tub by now. Time to get him to into PJ's and tuck him in. She leisurely climbed the stairs and walked down the hall until she stood at the bathroom door.

"Jim, you all done in there?" she asked while knocking gently on the door.

Silence followed.

Barbara knocked again, with a little more force "Jim, I need you to answer me," again there was no reply.

A small knot of worry formed in the pit of her stomach. "I'm coming in," she said with only a slight waver to her voice. She forced herself to grab the knob and open the door at what she hoped was a relaxed pace. Jim was fine, he was probably just in his own little world playing with his toys. She was going to open the door and see him in the tub; safe and sound.

Empty; the tub, the whole bathroom, was completely barren. Barbara stood in the doorframe, frozen in shock; waiting for Jim to pop out from behind the door or under the sink, laughing at his successful prank, but he didn't.

Snapping out of her stupor, she frantically began searching every nook and cranny “Jim, this isn’t funny, if you’re hiding come out now!”

No reply. Pausing in her search, Barbara took stock of her surroundings. Something was wrong, some detail of the room was off, other than her son’s absence. It didn’t take her long to figure out; the bath water was completely clear, no foam, no bath toys, no soap suds. Almost as if the tub had been drained and refilled with clean water.

While examining the tub, Barbara noticed something even more off-putting; the floor was dry as a bone. Even when they were careful, getting out of the tub would at least get the bathmat damp, more often than not they would get droplets or puddles of water leading from the tub to the door.

Her knuckles whitened around the rim of the bathtub, what had happened here.

Focus, she needed to focus, whatever strange thing had happened in the bathroom Jim wasn’t there anymore. She needed to find him. Barbara tamped down the urge to rush around the house, tearing apart every hiding place she could get her hands on. She needed to approach this like the doctor she was, not the panicked mother she was increasingly tempted to be.

A methodical search, starting on the top floor, eliminating potential spots where Jim could be hiding, working her way through the house. Barbara took a deep bracing breath; in through her nose for five seconds, hold for five, out through her mouth, five more. She could do this, somewhere along her search Jim would turn up.

Five Part 2

Chapter Notes

> Here's part two, where things go from bad to worse for Barbara and Jim.

It wasn’t as dark anymore. Did he fall asleep, it didn’t feel like he’d been asleep, being swallowed up by the darkness, but it hadn’t felt like being awake either. Whatever he had been, he was awake now, and the darkness was fading away.

Jim blinked, grass, he could see grass right in front of his face. He blinked again, and again, he could blink; and see and feel himself doing it. His body wasn’t surrounded by smothering blackness, he could see himself, and see himself move.

Jim twitched his fingers, watching them curl around the dirt, first one hand, then the other. Using the two hands together, pushed himself upright. Instead of grass, now he was looking at bark; a tree. Jim was sitting on the ground by a tree.

Jim looked left, then right, then left again; more trees, a forest, he was in a forest. For the first time since the blackness swallowed him, Jim was feeling a little less scared. His house was surrounded by trees, maybe it was close by, close enough to walk to.

Two hands raised, gripping the tree bark, holding him steady. Jim braced one foot against the ground, then the other one, then pushed. He was standing up now, but something was wrong.

He could move and feel his arms and legs, but they weren’t right, his hands and feet weren’t where they were supposed to be.

Jim wobbled in place, he wasn't surrounded by blackness anymore, but now there were sounds; wind blowing the tree leaves, twigs snapping, hundreds of insects chirping.

Loud, everything was loud.

And the smells. The woods always had their own smell, like moss and wet dirt and green growing things, but now it was different. It was too *much* . The smell of the forest around him was pungent and strong, on top of all the usual smells there was a new sharp, musky smell.

His eyes stung, he wanted to puke.

An owl hooted, Jim snapped his head in the direction of the sound, a tree branch broke, he swung back in the opposite direction.

He stepped back against the tree; wrong, everything was wrong. His face, fingers and toes, arms and legs, they weren't the way they were supposed to be.

A gust of wind hit him in the face, blasting him with a wave of smells.

Jim screwed his eyes shut and let out a high pitched wail.

Too much, it was all too much.

He crumpled against the side of the tree, squeezing his eyes shut and clapping his hands over his ears to shut out the sounds of the woods.

None of this was right, *he* wasn't right.

Jim curled up on the ground and started to sob.

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Barbara stood in the center of the living room, panting. She had searched the entire house from attic to basement, every nook and cranny, and found no trace of Jim.

She couldn't move, she wanted to scream, look under the couch and behind the water heater again; because maybe this time, *this time* , Jim would be there. Where was he, what could have happened to him? Little boys didn't just vanish into thin air while they were taking their baths.

Breathe, breathe, she needed to think logically. Jim wasn't in the house, she knew that much. Where could he be, should she call the police, should she have called them an hour ago when she first noticed Jim was missing? What if he was somewhere she just hadn't looked?

Outside, maybe Jim was in the backyard. A tiny corner of Barbara's mind whispered that Jim was no more likely to be outside than any other place she had looked and that she was grasping at straws. Swallowing her doubts, she rushed out the back door.

It was the same as the rest of the house; barren, vacant, no sign of Jim

anywhere. Unwilling to admit to herself that Jim was well and truly missing, Barbara searched the yard. Around the side of the house, behind the decorative boulders, all along the perimeter fence.

It was no use, Jim wasn't here.

She sank to her knees, tears prickling her eyes. Barbara buried her face in her hands and let out a gut wrenching sob. Gone, her baby was gone.

Headlines and news banners flashed behind her eyes. Children that vanished from their parent's care. Sometimes they were found; damaged, tortured, frightened, and occasionally dead. Sometimes they were never found at all, swallowed up by the cruel world that had stolen them away. Was that going to be Jim, was she going to see his picture plastered all over the evening news, spend days, months, years, wondering if she was ever going to see her baby again?

Another sob broke through the silent night air, but not hers. Barbara felt her heart stop; could it be, did she really hear that, she hadn't just imagined it out of desperation. A second sob called out, confirming that it was not a figment of her imagination. She stood up and looked around, trying to determine the source of the sound. One more soft cry, coming from the woods, this time it was clear enough for her to recognize, Jim.

Overwhelming relief, and paralyzing fear battled for dominance in her mind. Jim was close, but was he alright, was he injured, in pain? Barbara dashed into the trees, trying to determine where Jim's cries were coming from.

She shouted into the dark woods "Jim!"

Another sob, closer this time, she was heading in the right direction.

"Jim, if you can hear me, I need you to come closer,"

The crying continued uninterrupted, if Jim had heard her he was too scared to respond. Barbara rushed even faster towards the sound, stumbling over rocks and bushes, nearly tripping multiple times. Jim's cries were steadily getting louder as she got closer. She glimpsed a small figure huddled at the base of a tree and stopped short.

"Jim?" Barbara whispered as she took a tentative step closer, not wanting to frighten him.

He ignored her, keeping his face buried between his knees, sobbing.

"...Jim…"

Suddenly, as if just now noticing her, he snapped his head up.

Barbara felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach; involuntarily, she staggered back.

His features were foreign, inhuman; navy blue skin, nose flat and hooked, underbite with diminutive tusks, ears tapered to a narrow point.

Coldness seeped into Barbara's core, her brain refused to process what her eyes were seeing. This creature wasn't her son, she didn't know what she was looking at. This… this *thing* couldn't possibly be Jim.

The two of them stared at each other; unblinking and silent, until a soft murmur broke the silence.

“Mommy?”

She looked into his eyes, familiar bright blue eyes, the same color as *her* eyes.

It clicked. This was Jim, this was her boy.

Barbara kneeled down and opened her arms “It’s ok honey, come here,”

Jim’s bizarre features crumpled as he scrambled into her embrace with a sob.

“mommy, mommy, mommy…”

His cries trailed off into bawling as he buried his face in her shoulder. Barbara wrapped her arms around him and pulled Jim into the tightest hug she could manage. Her baby was here, alive and safe.

But he wasn't the same child she had left in the bathtub.

Guilt washed over her. This was Jim, not some grotesque beast, her son. But the changes he had undergone couldn’t be ignored. Even with his face buried in her shoulder she could tell. His skin was hard, like

stone, but it didn't seem to prevent him from moving. Holding him in her arms was not unlike what Barbara imagined cuddling a marble statue would feel like.

Barbara adjusted her grip on Jim and hoisted herself up while balancing him on her hip. Heavier, he was so much heavier "It's ok sweetie, you're safe," she crooned into his ear "Mommy's got you,"

Jim sobs continued uninterrupted, but he tightened his arms around her in response. Home, she needed to get Jim back into the house, before anyone saw him like this. Still carrying Jim, she walked through the dark forest back to the house. Carefully, Barbara opened the back door without setting Jim down and flicked on the kitchen light.

Jim shrieked and buried his face deeper into her shoulder, trying to curl up even tighter against her. Frantically, Barbara fumbled for the light switch. No lights, were they too bright, did they hurt him?

Upstairs, she needed to get Jim upstairs into his bedroom. There they could calm down, figure out what had happened to him.

Balancing Jim's weight on her hip, Barbara made to precarious trip up the stairs and into Jim's room. Gently, she detangled his arms from around her and set him down on the bed. He stared up at her, shivering and crying, still naked from his bath.

"Let's get some PJ's on, ok kiddo?" Barbara reached into the dresser and pulled out Jim's favorite dinosaur pajamas, only to be hit with another unsettling realization.

Jim had grown significantly; clothes that had fit him perfectly a few hours earlier couldn't even be forced over his longer arms and legs.

Trembling only slightly, Barbara carefully replaced the pajamas in the dresser. She needed to be calm, Jim needed her to be calm. He was upset enough already, he couldn't see her break down to.

James, he had left some old clothes of his that were now sitting in the Goodwill pile.

"Jim, I'm going to go get some clothes for you, will you be ok by yourself for a little bit?"

Jim didn't respond at first, still trembling and crying softly, before he looked up and nodded.

In spite of everything, Barbara couldn't help but smile; her brave boy.

"I'll be right back,"

As fast as she could, Barbara dashed down to the basement and grabbed a T-shirt and a pair of shorts before running back upstairs. Jim was sitting on his bed, right where she had left him. As best she could, she dressed him in the now oversized garments. Once she was done, Barbara sat next to him and began rubbing his shoulders in soothing circles.

Jim was marginally calmer now. He was still curled up in a ball and trembling, but he had stopped crying. Now was probably a good time as any to start asking him questions.

"Jim," she spoke clearly in a low, soft tone "Can you tell me what

happened to you?”

“I dunno,” Jim whimpered in a tone that was very close to a whine.

Barbara was silent for a few beats. Jim was still very upset, whatever had happened to…change him, it was likely he didn’t fully understand it. He was only five years old. Hell, she was an adult and she didn’t understand any of this.

“Just tell me what happened when you were in the bathtub, after I left,”

Jim sniffled and stuttered out an answer “I put the bath bomb in, and then the water got dark and pulled me down, and then I was in the woods, and-- and-- an--” he trailed off, on the verge of slipping back into hysterical sobs.

Barbara quickly wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close, cooing comforting nonsense sounds into his ear. She hoped Jim didn't notice how badly her hands were shaking.

From what Jim said it sounded like the bath bomb was responsible for his transformation. But that was ludicrous, it was a lump of baking soda and scented oil, it was impossible for a bath bomb to do….this.

But then again they'd left impossible in the rearview mirror a while back.

Jim pulled back from Barbara's embrace just enough to look up at her, his sniffling had evolved into frantic panting “Wh-- what happened! Why am I like this!”

That was the question wasn't it, knowing the root cause didn't even come close to answering all of the questions she had.

How had the bath bomb changed him, *what* had it even changed him into? Barbara was no closer to these answers.

"I'm not sure sweetie,"

Jim's face fell " *I don't wanna be like this!* " he wailed "Can't you-- fix it, change me back-- please!"

Barbara combed her fingers through his hair as he broke down into sobs for the second time that evening, hoping that he couldn't see her own tears. She wanted more than anything to make this all better, to give him answers, to support his belief that mommy could fix anything; but she couldn't. Barbara was just as much in the dark as Jim was.

Just when she finally felt composed enough to say something comforting her fingers ran over a bump on Jim's head. Not quite believing what she had touched, Barbara examined his scalp with her fingers, in doing so she found a twin bump mirroring the first.

Horns.

Dear god he had *horns* .

The dam burst inside her, what was she going to *do* . Barbara didn't know how Jim's altered state would affect his health. He didn't appear

to be in any pain right now, but that could change. God only knows how his stony flesh would react to a young child's rapid growth.

Barbara squeezed Jim against her so tight, if he hadn't changed into a living sculpture she would have been worried about hurting him.

She couldn't let anyone see him like this, not teachers, not neighbors, not anyone. If this got out, Jim would be locked up or worse.

Barbara didn't want to think about worse.

Where did that leave her, she couldn't just keep him in the basement forever, what kind of life would that be?

Barbara wept openly, well beyond the point of worrying about how Jim would react to her tears. Jim was still bawling his eyes out, even if he had noticed that she was crying to, he was so upset that it couldn't push him into a further state of distress.

Exhaustion and despair weighed on her like a lead blanket, Barbara laid down on the mattress with Jim curling up against her.

Try as she might, Barbara couldn't see a way out of this. Both of their lives had been irreversibly altered for the worse.

Five Part 3

Chapter Summary

It's not over.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara hadn’t slept a wink. She had a kink in her back and one of her arms had gotten pinned by Jim’s weight and gone numb. Her legs were cramped into position after being curled up on a too-small mattress for hours.

She was in a nightmare that she couldn’t wake up from.

The logical part of her knew that ignoring Jim’s condition wouldn’t make it go away, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t tempted. Even after racking her brain all night she couldn't think of any good way to protect Jim and keep his condition a secret. The only two options she had come up with were to immediately move somewhere as isolated as possible; or hide Jim, lie to the police, and pretend that he really had disappeared. Neither plan was feasible or practical and both would be the end of life as they knew it.

Despite how terrible her either plan was, Barbara knew that she had to start implementing one of them. The consequences for Jim would be dire if she didn’t.

Even knowing that, she still couldn’t force herself to get up and take action. Barbara desperately wanted to not think about the unavoidable consequences of Jim’s transformation for just a little longer.

When she thought about the terrible things she was going to have to

keep her son safe, it was almost enough to make her start sobbing all over again.

Barbara was trying to summon the will to get out of bed for the upteenth time when something inexplicable happened for the second time in twenty four hours.

Jim *shrank* right in her arms.

Shock froze her for a moment before she scrambled upright, desperate to see what had happened to Jim now.

Barbara blinked repeatedly, lightheaded from sitting up so quickly, not quite believing what she was seeing.

Jim, soft and small and *normal* Jim, stared straight back at her, looking confused and now positively drowning in his father's t-shirt.

"I….I'm me again,"

A jubilant smile slowly spread across Jim's face "I'M ME AGAIN!"

Somehow Barbara still had enough tears left to cry, only this time from joy.

The nightmare was over.

All the worries, all the fears, all the dread of what might happen to

Jim melted away. Whatever the bath bomb had done to him, its effects had worn off. It was the only explanation she could think of.

Jim giggled and jumped on the mattress, ecstatic at being back in his own skin. Barbara gave a warbaly laugh at his antics before glancing at her watch.

6:17am

Well now was a good a time as any to start the day. She snatched Jim up during one of his celebratory circuits around the bed and brought him in for a tight hug “Time for breakfast kiddo, How do you feel about pancakes?”

“Yay pancakes!”

Half an hour later, Jim sat at the table, wolfing down pancakes that had to be at least eighty percent syrup. Barbara hung up the phone, having just finished calling both of them in sick for the day. After last night’s trauma, both of them needed a mental health break.

Jim appeared to be bouncing back just fine, the resiliency of youth no doubt, but she didn’t want to push him.

“Hey mom?”

Barbara turned to address him “Yes, what is it?”

He shuffled pancake crumbs and syrup around with his fork

“What….happened to me last night?”

“Well Jim, I’m not quite sure,” she replied “I think that something in the bath bomb changed you for a little bit,”

“But why?”

Barbara bit her lip, how to give him answers when she had none “Sorry sweetie, I really don’t know,”

“Oh….” Jim pondered that for a while “So where’d the bath bomb come from?”

She took a seat across from him “I bought it at an estate sale last summer,” she paused, thinking of the best way to explain further “An estate sale is when someone dies and their family decides to sell all of their stuff by letting people come into their house and pick out things to buy,”

“So the bath bomb used to belong to someone that’s dead now?”

“Yes, that’s right,”

Jim gave a small frown at the unsatisfactory answer “So where’d the dead person get it?”

“I don’t know,” Barbara did her best to keep her tone light “I guess it’s just a mystery,”

Honestly she didn’t even know who the estate sale had been for, she and James had dropped in on impulse while driving back from getting the car fixed. Barbara didn't know how or why someone would have anything like the bath bomb that had changed Jim, and quite frankly she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

The bath bomb in question had been purchased as part of a package deal, two dollars for a whole grocery bag full of bath bombs. She’d used some of the other ones from the bag over the past few months and they’d been perfectly normal. There was no way of knowing if the bath bomb that had changed Jim was the only one of its kind or not. But either way, after last night, there was no way in *hell* she was letting any of the rest near water.

Jim didn’t appear happy about the lack of information, but he accepted that Barbara simply didn’t know the answers to his questions. They finished their breakfast in comfortable silence. Cleaning and wrapping up their morning routine at a leisurely pace.

Early in the afternoon, they took a break from relaxing at home and ventured out for a trip to the library. Barbara left Jim to his own devices in the children’s section. The sort of books she was after were somewhere else entirely.

She was tempted to forget that this whole ugly episode ever happened. Never speak of it or acknowledging the strange form Jim had taken ever again. But part of her refused to let it go.

After all, she still had no idea how or why the the bath bomb caused this to happen, who’s to say it couldn’t happen again?

Her eyes darted back and forth between the mythology and the

science sections. Where to even begin? Before last night she had never thought bath bomb induced transformations were possible, let alone read books about them. The only option seemed to be to cast a wide net and hope for the best.

Approaching the shelf, Barbara started browsing the stacks and pulling off anything that looked halfway promising.

Once she was done, she retrieved Jim from the Kid's Corner and brought him and all the books he'd chosen to the front desk to check out. Book bags in hand, they headed home, making a side trip to their favorite takeout place to pick up dinner.

Later in the evening, dinner eaten and boxes discarded, Jim was watching cartoons while Barbara sat at the kitchen table, pouring over the books she'd gotten earlier.

So far, all the information she had found was frustratingly unhelpful. Right off the bat the science books proved to be no help at all. None of them described any kind species that resembled what Jim had turned into, let alone mention any kind of transformation.

The mythology and folklore books weren't much better. Some descriptions of mythic creatures lined up pretty darn close to Jim's changed state, but there were always a few characteristics that prevented her from categorizing Jim's blue shape as on thing or another.

Gargoyle currently topped the list of possibilities she had going, but even that hypothesis had some glaring flaws. Namely, should couldn't figure out whether a supernatural creature had inspired the architectural feature or vice versa.

Furthermore, for every type of cryptid she read about, descriptions varied wildly from source to source. Every book she picked up had a different idea of what made a Gargoyle, Minotaur, Yeti, or Troll. Barbara was positively drowning mythological knowledge. It was impossible to separate descriptions of actual creatures that had inspired these fables from the whimsy of iron age story tellers.

The descriptions they had on transformations were even worse. The transformations described in books ranged from semi-plausible to highly doubtful to completely ridiculous. Quite frankly, she wasn't sure where bath bombs fit on that scale.

Maybe it was time to throw in the towel and mix herself a drink..

An ear splitting scream rang out from the next room, shattering her focus. Barbara shot out of her seat, knocking her chair to the floor.

Jim.

She dashed into the next room only to be instantly paralyzed with shock. Jim was standing in front of the hallway mirror, his eyes locked onto his reflection.

He looked exactly the same as he did when she had found him in the woods the night before. His clothes looked painfully tight over his longer, thicker limbs, and Barbara was certain that if she touched his blue skin it would have the same stony feel that it did last night.

Icy tendrils of fear snaked into her chest.

This wasn't over, not even close.

Jim hadn't moved, his eyes still fixed on the mirror, too stunned to react. It only now occurred to her that he had never seen his reflection last night.

How had this happened? Had the effects of the bath bomb not worn off, but instead, laid dormant only to return in full force later. If so, what had caused it, why now, why hadn't Jim changed back at some other time?

The window caught her eye; no one could be allowed to see this. Barbara darted over to the window and fiddled with the blinds, shutting out the fading light of the sunset.

Wait….sunset….

Jim had turned back to normal early in the morning, about the same time the sun would have risen, and when he changed just a moment ago, the sun had just gone down.

It wasn't certain, but Barbara had a gut feeling that she'd figured out something important. For whatever outlandish, unnatural reason, Jim's transformation was connected to sunrise and sunset.

"….mom…." Jim said softly "….what's happening to me…."

That was the million dollar question wasn't it; if his transformation was tied to sunrise and sunset how long would it go on. Would it eventually stop? Would each change be the same or would Jim be altered more with every passing night? What if the day ever came that he didn't turn back to normal again?

She gave him the only answer she could.

“I don’t know sweetie,”

The blinds shut against prying eyes, Barbara went over to Jim and gathered him up into her arms, trying to give comfort in place of explanations.

The nightmare wasn’t over, it was just getting started.

“I just don’t know,”

Chapter End Notes

> That's the end of the opening arc, time is going to start going by a lot faster now that the intro part is done. Just to confirm, Jim is a troll by night and a human by day, more details of his transformation will be revealed in later chapters. Thank you to everyone that left comments or kudos, you guys are the best!

Six

Chapter Summary

> A year has passed since Jim has started his nightly transformation, their family has survived, but storm clouds are brewing on the horizon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of crackling plastic made Barbara looked up from the pan she was drying.

Jim sat on the floor holding the pieces a broken remote control car, yet another casualty of his preternatural strength.

Tears shone in his eyes, the corners of his mouth wobbled; surefire signs of a tantrum beginning to rear its ugly head.

She bit back an aggravated groan.

It had been over a year since Jim's nocturnal transformation had started, and somehow the two of them had managed to keep it secret and maintain semi-normal lives.

Jim had come to the conclusion that what he turned into was a monster from the Disney movie he liked about monsters hiding in kids' closets. Barbara herself wasn't crazy about using that particular word to describe what he changed into, but it helped Jim cope, so she learned to live with it.

They survived by following a strict set of rules. No telling anyone

about his blue form; not even Toby or Nana Domzalski. Barbara had drilled that into him as hard as she dared. Both of them had to be inside the house with doors locked and curtains shut half an hour before sunset. She worked only during the day now, it had taken all of her bargaining power and every last favor she could call in, but she got the clinic to agree. Barbara needed to be home to take care of Jim, babysitters weren't an option any more.

Making sure the pan wasn't dripping, Barbara set it down on the counter and walked over to Jim.

They were no closer to the big answers, but day to day consistencies in Jim's change had revealed some clues.

The transformation was consistent, every night he took the same blue, stony shape. It happened strictly according to the movement of the sun. Jim changed as soon as the sun set completely and turned back to normal the instant the first rays of sunshine peeked over the horizon in the morning. How long it lasted varied according to the seasons and the corresponding lengths of days and nights. Cloudy or stormy weather didn't affect the timing of his change at all.

The initial concerns she'd had over the change affecting his health proved to be groundless. His blue appearance didn't change on a night to night basis. Jim appeared to grow and develop at the rate a healthy child should in either form.

Interestingly enough, he didn't need to sleep very much when he was blue. Barbara had stressed over Jim's seeming insomnia for months before she managed to establish a schedule that suited his requirements.

But, that didn't mean that there weren't problems. In his nocturnal form, all of Jim's senses were heightened to the Nth degree. Timers

and smoke alarms weren't annoying, they were ear-splittingly painful. Flashlights were blinding. He could vomit from the smell of vapor rub alone. On top of that, Jim was significantly stronger and more durable to. It all boiled down to Jim having a hard time doing a lot of his favorite activities once the sun went down.

Case in point, Jim whimpered at the broken toy, now starting to tremble as well. Barbara had to be careful, if handled correctly the oncoming tantrum could be diffused before it started.

"Can I see?"

Jim didn't respond, not reacting as she gently pried the car out of his hands. A cursory examination revealed that while the body and doors of the car were pulverized, the motor and wheels were intact.

"We can fix your car," she said cheerily "If we glue it back together tonight it will be all better by tomorrow,"

Her words had no effect on him. Jim's sniffles and whines were increasing in volume and frequency. In less than a minute they were sure to escalate into full blown sobs and screams.

Barbara grimaced, looks like a quick fix wasn't going to do it tonight. She sat back on her haunches and placed both hands firmly on Jim's shoulders.

"Jim, look at me," she took care to ensure her tone was low and firm, but also comforting and calm.

The whines didn't stop, but Jim did raise his eyes to meet hers.

“I want you to take big breaths in through your nose,”

Jim panted and gasped, inhaling deeply in spite of his sniffling. Barbara let herself relax a little bit and started rubbing his back. He was listening to her tonight, that was good.

“Like we practiced,” she continued “Five mississippi's in, hold for five, five mississippi’s out,”

Shakily, he did as she asked. Four breath cycles and he stopped shaking, at eight his sobs faded away. Three more and all that remained of the averted tantrum was the occasional sniffle.

“Feeling better?”

Jim snorted back unused tears “uh, huh,”

Barbara let out a small sigh of relief and brought him in for a hug; averting her gaze from the basement door behind him.

This past year had been so hard on Jim. Every night he was forced into a different shape and had to deal with all of the side effects as they came. Being confined to the house while Toby and his friends were out having fun wasn’t fair, but what else could they do.

All Jim wanted to do was run and scream and play like a normal child; he couldn’t help the overstimulation and heightened strength that came with his blue form. Barbara knew this wasn’t good for him; being shut in and bottled up, but there were no other options. Jim

couldn't leave the house at night without the risk of discovery and all the consequences that came with it. So here they were, trying to make the best of a horrible situation.

Jim was still struggling to manage it all, no six year old should have to deal with the kind of stress that he did. He had started throwing explosive tantrums over the littlest things, more often than not they resulted in something breaking.

Barbara had been able to get a second-hand punching bag that was now set up in the basement. It wasn't ideal, but it did provide a physical outlet for Jim where he didn't have to worry about breaking or damaging anything. The punching bag did its job, but she might as well put a patch job on a shredded tire. It didn't solve any of the underlying issues that led to the tantrums in the first place.

With Jim's unnatural strength and durability, his tantrums had started to build to terrifying heights. One night it got so bad Barbara found herself doing the unthinkable.

She had just been so exhausted from work and Jim wouldn't stop screaming and kicking the walls no matter how much she tried to calm him down. Before she fully knew what she was doing, Barbara was carrying him into the basement, walking out, and locking the door behind him.

Afterward she had just sat on the couch, blankly staring at the wall while Jim screamed himself into exhaustion a storey below her.

Barbara had promised herself that she would never do it again; next time she would keep her cool, not lose her patience the way she did.

Never again had happened less than a month later.

Every time Barbara locked the basement door she swore to herself that this would be the last time. Then a few nights later, some little thing would inevitably send Jim flying off the handle beyond her control and it the cycle would start all over again. Barbara was at the end of her rope, it was hard enough providing for the two of them while keeping Jim's nightly change a secret, even without the constant fits and tantrums.

She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

Not now, don't think about that right now, thinking about it would just overwhelm her, if she started going to pieces now she wouldn't be able to stop. Barbara was just going to have to trust herself to figure this out. She was all Jim had. The two of them had made it this far; one way or another their family would survive.

But right now she needed to focus on the situation at hand.

Barbara stood up, wincing as the blood flowed back into her calves "How about we go into the kitchen, I've got a surprise for you,"

Jim perked up at the promise of a surprise and quickly scampered into the next room. He took a seat at the counter, watching while she got various items out of the pantry and fridge.

Another challenge posed by his transformation was diet. Quite simply, when Jim was in his blue form, food just wasn't edible.

There had been some rare hits along with the uncountable misses. Oddly enough, stuffed mushrooms topped that list. Needless to say, Jim's nighttime diet for the past year had been wildly inconsistent and

nowhere near balanced.

Jim eyed the growing number of packages on the counter with no small amount of curiosity. Earlier that week she had gone shopping for the most outlandish and exotic items she could find; even making a trip to the Whole Foods two towns over.

“I got a bunch of new foods so we can figure out things for you to eat when you’re blue,” she said while gesturing to the various packages.

Jim eagerly looked over the assorted items on the counter and started browsing through them.

Barbara let the tension fall out of her shoulders, it looked like Jim would be relaxed and engaged in trying new foods for the rest of the evening, no more tantrums tonight “So, what do you want to try first?”

Jim pointed at a small jar “That one,”

Barbara picked up the jar in question.

‘Blueberry Vanilla Chia Seed Cashew Butter’

Well if that wasn’t the most pretentious thing she had ever seen, Barbara didn’t know what was. Still, if Jim could eat it she would make it a household staple.

Unscrewing the lid, Barbara scooped out some of the butter with a

spoon and handed it to Jim.

Wasting no time, Jim popped the butter laden spoon into his mouth and started chewing.

Barbara opened her mouth to ask him what he thought of it when a metallic twang cut her off.

She stared, slack-jawed, in shock.

Jim still held the handle of the spoon, only now it’s head had been ripped clean off.

For a few moments the two of them didn’t move, then Jim hesitantly started chewing, the sound of shearing metal echoing in the silent kitchen, before he swallowed with a small gulp.

Chapter End Notes

> Before you ask Blueberry Vanilla Chia Seed Cashew Butter is a real thing.
>
> Sorry for the exposition heavy chapter, things are going to start picking up again in the next few chapters. They're going to deal with pretty emotionally heavy stuff, so please let me know if I need to add more to the tags. Without giving anything away, things at the Lake house are going to get worse before they get better.

Seven Part 1

Chapter Summary

A breaking point is reached

Chapter Notes

Content warning for emotional distress of a child. Also Jim refers to his troll form as a "monster". He does this purely because he thinks what he turns into is one of the monsters from the movie Monster's Inc. So when Jim uses the word monster to describe himself, none of the negative connotations of the word are involved.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gingerbread house had taken hours to build and decorate. In only seconds it had been knocked to the floor and shattered into dozens of pieces.

Jim glared at the destroyed house. A tiny part of him felt guilty over wrecking what he and his mom had spent an entire evening on. Mostly he was just too angry to care.

“Why can’t I go to the parade?!” he screamed.

Barbara stared down at him, just as calm and cool as she was when the yelling and the smashing started. Somehow this made him even angrier.

“You know why you can’t,”

Jim scowled, of course he knew. Jim wasn’t like other kids, every night he turned into a blue monster, and he had to stay at home to keep it a secret. That meant he couldn’t have sleepovers, or go trick or

treating, or camp with the Junior Mole Scouts, or do anything fun.

He *hated* turning into a monster every night. Not being able to eat any of his favorite foods, breaking all his toys by accident, staying in the house all the time. When he was blue everything was too bright, too loud, too *much* . It got so overwhelming that he just wanted to explode.

It wasn't *fair* .

Jim had to say no every time Toby wanted to play or stay over after dark. And he had to listen to all the other kids talk about fun things they did after school and cool vacations they went on. Everyone else got go out and have fun, it wasn't fair that he couldn't to.

Winter was the worst, the sun went down earlier so Jim had even less time to be outside after school. But this year was worse than usual. This year his school was going to have a float in the town's Christmas parade. Toby and the rest of the kids in his class got to dress up as elves and ride on it.

Sharp tusks dug into his upper lip as Jim growled. He *knew* his mom would never let him be in the parade with the other kids, but he thought that he could convince her to let him go watch.

Her answer had been an unflinching no.

Jim was done hearing the word no.

"If I dress up it'll be fine!" he shrieked up at her, getting louder with every word.

Barbara crossed her arms “We’ve been through this, a costume is just going to make people curious. You’re *not* going to the parade and that’s final.”

Jim’s nails dug sharply into his palms, his breath came in quick, angry pants.

He was done being stuck inside, not being able to go anywhere or do anything fun.

He was going to the Christmas parade whether Mom let him or not.

Jim ducked between Barbara’s legs, catching her off guard, and made a dash for the back door. Twisting the knob, he yanked the door open, ready to race off into the night. But before he could take a single step outside Barbara wrapped her arms around him from behind and lifted him off the floor.

He flailed and thrashed in her arms, trying to break free of her grip.

“James Lake Junior!” she slammed the back door shut with her foot “If you don’t calm down right this instant you’re going to go in time out!”

Jim renewed his struggles in response to her threat. Time out meant Mom putting him in the basement with the exercise band on the doorknob so he couldn’t get out, not until she came and let him out for bedtime.

“Jim.” Barbara’s voice was thunderous, he’d never made her this mad before “Stop. It. Now.”

He ignored her. She had no right to be mad at him when this was all her fault. She was the one making him stay in the house all the time. She knew how unfair she was being. If she really cared she’d find a way for him to go outside when he was blue. Jim screeched in frustration while continuing to try to break free of his mother’s grasp.

Wordlessly, Barbara started to carry him to the basement door.

He let out a ear splitting howl and struggled against her harder than he ever had before, kicking his legs and flailing his arms.

It wasn’t *fair* !

He wasn’t going to let his mom put him in the basement or keep him in the house anymore. Trapping him here night after night after night. Jim couldn’t take it anymore, he just couldn’t!

It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fa --

Something *gave* under his fist.

Instantly, Barbara dropped to the floor, letting go of Jim in the process.

Momentarily stunned, Jim slowly sat up from where he had landed, more surprised than hurt, and looked over toward his mom. She was

sprawled out all over the floor in a tangle of limbs, her breathing sounded wheezy and painful, both of her hands were pressed tightly against her left side.

An icy chill slowly crept through his veins as he realized what had happened. He couldn't get the sensation of feeling something bend and break out of his head. Whatever anger he had left evaporated away.

All of a sudden the parade didn't matter anymore.

Jim watched his mom struggle to her feet, swaying and trembling while she forced herself to stand, keeping at least one hand pressed to her side. Once she was upright, Barbara began to make her way down the hallway. Timidly, Jim followed.

When he caught up Barbara was inside the bathroom standing in front of the mirror. Wincing the whole time, she pried her hands off her side and peeled away her sweater.

Jim's heart dropped down into his stomach.

An ugly, purple bruise the size of an apple with bright red streaks stained the left side of her rib cage.

Jim couldn't breath.

Did *he* do that….

Had he…. *hurt* his mom….

Jim managed to choke out a soft whimper "….mom?"

Barbara didn't respond, she merely pulled down her shirt and limped out of the bathroom.

She'd yelled at him before, she'd put him in the basement and taken away his toys, but she'd never ignored him like this.

"….mom…." he whispered in a small voice "Are you ok?"

It was like she didn't even hear him, Barbara picked up her purse from the railing and put on her coat and shoes, flinching every time she moved her left side.

Only once she had gathered up all her things did she turn and speak to him.

"I'm going to the clinic," she said sternly "Do not leave the house while I'm gone, do you understand?"

Numbly, Jim nodded.

Without another word, Barbara turned and left, locking the door behind her. A few moments later Jim heard the sound of her car starting and pulling out of the driveway, then nothing.

Jim stood in silence for a few minutes, shock rooting his feet to the floor. Before slowly looking around at the destroyed house. He'd pulled down and thrown everything within reach; crushed the sugar cookies that they were supposed to decorate, shattered breakable Christmas decorations, scattered cookie crumbs and porcelain shards all over the floor in the process. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Mom hadn't been being mean; it wasn't her fault that he had such a big secret to keep. She didn't *want* to keep him in the house every night. Mom had tried to make it better, she'd offered to decorate cookies with him, and make paper snowflakes, and watch movies. But Jim hadn't wanted to feel better, he'd wanted to be angry.

No wonder Mom had tried to put him in the basement. He'd ruined the activities she'd planned, destroyed their decorations, and *hurt* her bad enough that she had to go to the clinic.

Jim's stomach churned with guilt as the memory of feeling something break inside her came back in full force. He couldn't have hurt her too bad, could he? Would she have to get a cast? What if she needed to get surgery?

A horrifying, gut wrenching thought struck him. What if she didn't come back at all?

It had happened before with his dad, just leaving one day and never returning. And why wouldn't she, Mom's life would be so much better if she didn't have to deal with Jim turning into a monster and being horrible.

The tears that had been building up spilled out onto his cheeks. Mom been trying so hard to cheer him up and help him have fun inside, and he'd hit her and *hurt* her. Jim's shoulders heaved as he started to cry in earnest. Nobody would blame Barbara for leaving, Jim didn't

deserve to have a mom like her anymore.

An idea came to him, making him pause mid-sob, maybe it wasn't too late.

As fast as he could, Jim raced into the kitchen, grabbed the broom and dustpan, and began sweeping up the floor. Maybe Barbara hadn't left for good yet, he still had a chance to change her mind. He would clean the house, fix everything, make it all better. Starting right now Jim would *be* better, he would stop getting angry and screaming and breaking things. He would always listen to his mom do what she told him. If he showed her how well-behaved and nice he could be, then she wouldn't *want* to leave. Even if he did turn into a blue monster every night. He'd be so good for her that she wouldn't mind.

While he was trying to move on to the next messy spot, the crumbs and pottery shards he'd already gathered fell out of the dustpan and back onto the floor.

But this would only work if she came back. Barbara might have already left forever.

Hands shaking, Jim swept the fallen crumbs and porcelain back into the dustpan.

He had to try, if there was even a small chance of Barbara coming back, Jim had to try and show her how good he could be, better than good, perfect even. Then maybe she'd still want to stay and be his mom, even after he….he….

Jim dragged the broom across the floor as fast as he could, desperately trying to make a dent in the massive mess he'd created earlier that night.

She had to come back, she just had to.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was hard to write, but I felt like it was important. Jim isn't the same Jim from the show here, he's a young child struggling to cope in an awful situation. In troll form he can't control his own strength and he gets overstimulated at the drop of a hat. To make matters worse he can't even properly get used to his troll form, he's jerked back and forth between human and troll completely involuntarily, regardless of whatever emotional state he's in. I tried to show him reacting the way a young child would in this situation. The continuation of this is coming next week, when we see things from Barbara's point of view.

Seven Part 2

Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for mentions of child abuse and emotional distress on Barbara's part, her mind goes to some pretty dark places in this. Also, something to keep in mind is that Barbara has her own biases, and the way she views things isn't necessarily fair or accurate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As hypocritical as it sounded coming from a doctor, Barbara found the process of receiving medical care tedious and frustrating. But finally, at long last, she walked out of the clinic and got into her car, glancing at the clock on the dash.

12:34am

Hours of waiting, an X ray and CT scan, and all Barbara had to show for it was a prescription for Percocet and an ice pack on loan from one of her coworkers.

She leaned heavily on the steering wheel, trying to summon the will to start the engine and drive home.

Two bruised ribs and a hairline fracture in a third. No real damage done, but it was going to hurt like hell for the next few weeks.

Jim wasn't even ten years old and he was already strong enough to damage bone.

Most of the time, Barbara liked to think she did a halfway decent job at the single parenting thing. She paid the bills on time, maintained a schedule that revolved around keeping Jim's secret, and of course, she had never raised a hand to him. No matter what some people might think, spanking was child abuse.

But in that instant, when Jim had hit her so hard it had knocked the air out of her lungs and dropped her to the floor; there had been the

sudden, overpowering urge to strike him back just as hard. She got herself out of there as fast as she could, both to get her injury looked at and for Jim's safety. The urge had faded rapidly, and it wasn't until later, sitting in the clinic's waiting room, that the raw horror of what she had desired for a split second hit her in full force.

Looking in the rearview mirror Barbara could see the heavy bags under her eyes, increasingly grim thoughts swirled around and around in her skull. She couldn't keep this up. At the clinic her supervisor had started making her put in extra hours to compensate for the fact that she never worked nights. And getting off her shift to come home and deal with Jim and his meltdowns left Barbara even more worn out. It took everything she had to keep up with housework and make sure they had food on the table, she didn't have enough energy to keep fighting Jim like this.

It killed her every time she locked him in the basement, but at this point she was out of options. Her fingernails dug into the steering wheel as she tightened her grip, not when she had come so close to doing something unforgivable.

Dread sank into the pit of Barbara's stomach like a lead cannon-ball as one thought, grimmer than the rest, bubbled to the surface. What was she going to do about Jim's tantrums after he started puberty?

Barbara slumped back in the car seat and shut her eyes. She had been giving it her all for years now, but everything she had just wasn't enough anymore.

It was over half an hour before Barbara finally put the key in the ignition and pulled out of the parking lot into the deserted street. The parade that had been the catalyst for this whole awful evening ended hours ago, but she could still see remnants of holiday festivities as she drove by. Faux evergreen boughs and ribbons wrapped around streetlamps, trees and storefronts lined with colorful lights that sparkled in the midnight streets; none of it did anything to lift her black mood.

All too soon, she pulled into her own driveway. Forcing herself to not drag her feet, Barbara stepped out of the car and made her way up to the house. At the very least she had to clean the crumbs and sharp objects off the floor before she went to sleep. Hopefully Jim had already gone to bed of his own volition. She just couldn't deal with another one of his outbursts right now.

Barbara paused at the front step, mentally preparing herself for the chaos she was about to walk into. She took one more slow, deep breath and opened the door; only to be completely floored at what she saw.

Nothing but immaculate rooms and spotless floors as far as the eye could see.

All of the thrown Christmas decorations and knick-knacks had been neatly placed back in their respective spots. Everything broken or shattered had been disposed of. And not a single cookie crumb was in sight.

Barbara cautiously walked into the next room, noticing that the miraculous clean up job extended into the kitchen as well. It was surreal, part of her wondered if what she was seeing was just a fatigue and painkiller induced mirage.

Glancing down at the table, she noticed the first anomaly in the otherwise pristine house.

A plate with a neat stack of toaster waffles sat in the spot on the table she favored during mealtimes. Off to the side was a carton of apple juice with the straw sticking out of it.

Barbara gripped the edge of the plate and tilted it slightly, confirming that is wasn't a figment of her imagination. With all the curve balls life had managed to throw at her, it took a lot to surprise Barbara; but this did the trick. She was at a complete and utter loss for words.

The sound of rapid footsteps pounding down the stairs was all the warning she received before Jim scrambled up to her and encircled her legs in a death grip.

Barbara blinked at him before looking back around at the freshly cleaned rooms "Jim….Did you do all this?"

He mumbled something into her knees.

"What was that sweetie?"

Jim lifted his face up toward her. His eyes were ret and puffy, his blue cheeks were caked in layers of dried tears. It looked like he'd been

crying for hours.

"*ImsorryImsorryImsorryImsorr--*"

"Jim, slow down," Barbara got down on one knee and placed her hands on his shoulders "What are you trying to say?"

He snuffled deeply, clearing his sinuses for a more coherent reply.

"I'm sorry I hit you-- and yelled-- and broke the gingerbread house-- and the nativity set," he said with a whimper "I won't do it again, I promise,"

Barbara looked around the cleaned house, then down at Jim, then back up, then Jim again. In the two years since Jim had started transforming at night, he'd never acted like this after one of his meltdowns. She had no idea how to respond.

"I….accept your apology," she said haltingly "Thank you for cleaning up the mess,"

Jim hiccuped out more sobs "I'll be good from now on, I won't ever get mad again, I promise. Please please please don't leave!"

Barbara stared at him in confusion, now why would he think….

Realization hit her like a bucket of ice water; the cold way she'd reacted after he hit her, walking out with no explanation. That was exactly what James did when he left.

Time came to a screeching halt; Barbara couldn't move, there was a roaring sound in her ears. She was faintly aware of Jim stuttering out more apologies.

Being exhausted and emotionally drained was no excuse for letting Jim think his only remaining parent was abandoning him. And for what, an accidental hit to the chest that hadn't done any real damage? It wasn't Jim's fault that he was stronger than any other child his age. This was hard for him to.

Her heart ached at the mental image of Jim deep cleaning the house in a desperate attempt to convince his mother to not abandon him. In the back of her mind she was aware of tears building up.

What was she *doing*? She thought she'd been managing to keep their lives together, but everything was still in pieces. Only this time there wasn't a magic bath bomb to blame. This time Barbara was the one doing the damage.

She made Jim doubt her love for him.

A sob started to bubble up in the back of her throat as the appalling realization washed over her. She was part of the problem. Her nose was so close to the grindstone Barbara hadn't even noticed when she started to slip in her parental duties. Locking her child in the basement on a regular basis, leaving him home alone for hours; how on earth had she convinced herself that those were ok things to do?

And to think that earlier tonight she'd been halfway tempted to….to….

Hot tears spilled out onto her cheeks, she had failed horribly as a parent, Barbara Lake didn't deserve to be called a mother anymore.

The sound of Jim collapsing brought her back to reality.

Seeing Jim, curled up in ball on the floor and still crying, froze her in place. The whole time she'd been having a mental breakdown, she'd failed to notice Jim having one of his own.

Jim was still here, she was still here.

They were still a family, and family didn't quit on each other no matter what.

Hastily, Barbara wiped her cheeks with her sleeve and forced down her sobs. Jim already felt guilty enough, she wasn't going to compound that by letting him see her cry.

Just because she'd failed Jim in a big way didn't mean it was time to give up. No matter how bad things got she couldn't stop trying. Even if everything she had wasn't enough, Barbara had to keep striving to do better, for both of their sakes.

Wasting no more time, Barbara got down completely on her knees and pulled Jim up into a tight hug. Ignoring the hot stab of pain that flared up in her side.

“It’s ok sweetie, I’m right here,” she crooned “I’m not going anywhere,”

Barbara continued murmuring words of comfort to Jim as his sobs gradually slowed.

Eventually, once Jim calmed down to the point of being able to carry on a conversation, Barbara leaned back on her haunches, looking at Jim face to face.

“Jim, I promise, no matter what, I am never going to leave you,” Barbara barely kept her voice from cracking “You’re my son and I love you, and I will *always* be here for you,”

“Really?” he asked in a small voice “Even after I….I….”

“Oh sweetie….” Barbara carded her fingers through Jim’s hair, making sure to avoid his budding horns “You made a big mistake, but I still love you, and there is *nothing* you could ever do to make me stop loving you,”

Jim looked up at her with wide eyes “You mean it?”

“Of course I do,”

The future still terrified her, keeping Jim’s blue form a secret wouldn’t get any easier; he got bigger and stronger every day, and his horns and tusks kept getting more pronounced to. But no matter what he turned into in the end, Barbara would *never* let Jim doubt for a moment that she loved him with all her heart.

She cupped the side of his face “Jim, no matter what happens, I will always love you and I am never going to leave you. We’re a team and we’re going to stick together.”

Relief washed over Jim’s face, she saw the tension leave his shoulders as he relaxed for the first time since the sun went down. Jim curled deeper into her embrace, burying his cheek against her collarbone and rubbing the top of his head against her neck.

“I love you to Mom,”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update, this past week has been pretty difficult. I had to deal with one thing after another in my personal life. I'm still very much behind, so unfortunately, the next update will be delayed while I get caught up.

Coming April 21st: both Jim and Barbara are in a better place than they were a year ago, but better doesn't necesarilly mean good.

Eight

Chapter Notes

> Happy Easter everyone! Here's an update to celebrate. I think this might be the longest chapter I've written to date.
>
> A big thank you to everyone that gives comments and kudos, you have no idea how much it brightens my day to see people enjoying this story. I honestly was not expecting it to get as popular as it did, you guys are the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barbara replaced the last of the couch cushions. Well that settled it, Sally-Go-Back wasn't in the living room. How Jim and Toby managed to scatter their toys across the entire house was a mystery to her. And since Toby had already left for the night, it fell to Barbara to help Jim find the wayward toy.

"Mom," Jim called from the next room "I found it,"

Sounds like they could call off the search party, Barbara had been starting to wonder if she was going to have to pull up the carpet to find Sally-Go-Back.

"Can you come help me get it?"

Curious and a little concerned, Barbara followed his voice into the kitchen. Where exactly had that toy ended up that he needed help getting it?

Upon entering, she saw that Jim was standing in front of the back door. He pointed into the dark backyard from the window "It's over there,"

She peeked through the glass and sure enough, there was Sally-Go-Back, sitting forlornly on the lawn only six feet away from the back door.

"Jim," Barbara said in what she hoped was a light, casual tone "How do you feel about going outside to get Sally-Go-Back yourself?"

Jim balled his fingers up in the curtain and stubbornly shook his head no.

Well that answered that.

Barbara fought to keep her expression neutral and went out to retrieve the toy. There had been a time when Jim would have jumped at any chance to be outside at night.

Overall, Jim's behavior had shown a marked improvement over the past year; he was calm, gentle, and his wild tantrums were a thing of the past. Having Jim be so well behaved was definitely a huge load off of Barbara's back, but she still couldn't help but worry. At least when he was throwing tantrums there had been no doubt about what was on his mind, but now Jim was so reserved she could hardly guess at what he was feeling.

Barbara stepped back inside and shut the door behind her.

"Here you go," she said while handing over Sally-Go-Back, Jim took the toy and went to place it back in the toy box with the rest.

As he opened the lid, Barbara noticed a bicycle chain with half of the links missing and bite marks on either end mixed in with the toys.

So that's what had happened to his old bike kit.

"Are all of your toys put away?"

"Yep,"

"And your lego set to?"

"Yep,"

"Good," she clapped her hands together "Now, what do you want to make for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Can we do orange rolls?" Jim asked with an eager grin.

"Sounds good to me,"

Jim ran back to the kitchen and joined her in getting out supplies and ingredients.

While Jim couldn't eat normal foods when he was blue, that didn't stop him from *making* food. Preparing favorite meals and treats to consume the following day had quickly become one of their favorite night-time activities.

While kneeling down to get the large mixing bowl out of the cabinet, Barbara noticed the exercise band, once again, hanging off the basement doorknob.

She had to bite her lip to keep from saying anything. Over a dozen times she had thrown that damned thing in the garbage, only to find it neatly replaced a few hours later.

She told Jim over and over again that she wasn't going to use the basement as a punishment anymore, and he didn't need to be locked up and that it was wrong of her to lock him in the basement in the first place, but apparently Jim didn't quite believe that.

Part of Barbara wanted to force a conversation about it here and now. But she'd learned a long time ago that a big part of parenting was picking her battles. She risked a glance at the library book sitting on the coffee table. Seeing as she was planning on starting a doozy later tonight; it was probably better to let the exercise band lie for the moment.

"Mom," Jim piped up, cutting into her thoughts "Can you measure the dry ingredients into the bowl for me?"

"Will do," Barbara Lake might not be much of a chef, but she could measure a mean cup of flour.

Jim got to work zesting the oranges while Barbara continued measuring ingredients and pouring them into the mixing bowl.

"Mom wait stop!"

Barbara froze mid task, she had been about to fill a measuring cup with water from the faucet “What is it?”

“You need *warm* water to put the yeast in,” he said matter-of-factly “Not cold,”

Barbara eyed the tap uncertainly “Does it really matter?”

The affronted look on Jim’s face told her that it most certainly did.

She surrendered, filling the cup with warm water under Jim’s close scrutiny. Honestly, set one measly little pasta salad on fire and suddenly your eight year old thought you needed supervision.

Once the dough came together, Jim relented and allowed Barbara to help roll it out and spread the orange filling. He insisted on slicing the rolls himself though. Barbara felt uneasy at the idea letting him handle sharp knives; but realistically, if Jim accidentally cut himself it would probably do more damage to the knife.

Soon, the completed orange rolls were neatly stacked in the pan and sealed in plastic wrap, waiting to be baked at sunrise.

Barbara watched Jim slide the pan into the fridge. No use in putting this off any longer.

“Jim, can you come with me into the living room?” she asked as calmly as she could “We need to have a talk,”

Jim instantly looked uneasy, no doubt worried about what such a talk might entail. Nevertheless, he obediently came over to the couch and took a seat.

Barbara sat down next to him.

“Jim,” she paused, trying to think of the best way to broach the subject “I’ve noticed that it doesn’t seem like you want to go outside when you’re blue, is that true?”

Jim slumped and looked down at the floor “I can’t go outside cause if people saw me they would be confused and scared and might do something bad by mistake,” he mumbled, parroting the argument she had told him over and over for years.

“That’s right,” she affirmed “I’m glad that you understand how important it is that no one sees you like this,”

Jim wasn’t in any trouble here, she couldn’t let him think that he was.

“But if there was an emergency, like an earthquake, and you had to go outside at night, do you think you could do that?”

Jim squirmed and avoided meeting her eyes, clearly very uncomfortable with where this conversation was going.

“Jim?”

Despite how much he was fighting it, Jim's angular features started to crumple. Her heart gave a lurch, she'd hoped to do this without upsetting him, but now it looked like Jim was ready to cry.

Gently, Barbara slid across the couch to be right by his side.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

Jim turned away, still refusing to look her in the eye.

Anxious but undaunted, Barbara kept pressing.

"Jim please, tell me what you're feeling right now. Even if it's bad or it doesn't make sense, you can tell me anything,"

"Why would people get scared if they saw me?" he murmured while still looking down at the floor.

The question caught her off guard "Well….because you look so different, they might not understand that you're a little boy,"

"But I'm not a little boy,"

She caught herself "Oh yes, that's right you're not little anymore, you're a big--"

"No." He cut her off "I'm not."

It took a few more seconds for Barbara to register what he was really saying “Oh Jim….it doesn’t matter that you look different at night, you’re still the same on the inside,”

“No I’m not!” Jim snapped his head up to look at her face to face “I don’t just *look* different! I am different! I’m made of rock, I have sharp teeth and horns, I can’t eat anything normal--”

His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper as he looked away again “….I’m a monster….”

The bottom fell out of her stomach, this time she knew he wasn’t referring to a character from a disney movie “Don’t you ever say that Jim,” she grasped his blue hands with hers “We might not be sure what you change into, but I *know* you’re not a monster. It doesn’t matter that you’re blue, or have horns, or eat metal; you’re my son, an--”

“What if people should be scared of me?” his voice was barely audible, still she heard just as clearly as if he’d shouted it.

It took everything Barbara had to keep the horror off her face.

Jim had been walking on eggshells ever since that awful night, but that he would come to such a terrible conclusion was alarming. Why hadn’t she *noticed* how much Jim was hurting? How long had he been suffering in silence, thinking the worst about himself, while she just went around completely unaware--

Stop. Speculating on when exactly Jim had started feeling this way wasn’t going to do either of them a bit of good. She was definitely

going to try to be more attentive to Jim's mood in the future, but the most important thing right now was to get this awful idea out of his head.

As gently as she could, Barbara cupped the side of Jim's face and pulled his chin up to look at her "Jim, when you turn blue do you stop enjoying things like cooking and playing with action figures?"

"No…." he mumbled

"Do you stop loving me or caring about Toby?"

"No! Of course I don't!"

"That's because you're still *you* ," she moved her hand from his chin to his shoulder "Whether you're blue, red, green, or orange; you're still *Jim* ,"

Her words finally seemed to sink in. Some of the tension left Jim's shoulders he started to consider her point.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," She gave his shoulder a comforting squeeze "I know changing every night is hard for you, but we're in this together. If something new happens when you change, or even if you're just feeling sad or confused, please just come talk to me about it, then I can help you, ok?"

“Ok Mom,” he gave her a small smile, no doubt more to reassure her than anything else, but Barbara would take it.

Encouraged by the positive change in Jim’s mood, Barbara decided to bring the conversation back to where she planned to take it “Now I know this is scary for you, but you have to be able to go outside,” she picked the book up off the coffee table “This is a book about national parks in California,”

Jim stared at the book in question, confusion written all over his face.

“I went through and marked all the ones with nothing but woods for miles and miles around that we can drive to in less than a day,” she took a deep breath, time to rip the band aid off “I think it would be a good idea for us to go camping at one of them,”

Jim froze, not quite believing what she was proposing.

“We would be safe and alone and no one will see you,” Barbara held the book out towards him “I think this would be a good way to help you get comfortable with being outside when you’re blue,”

Judging by the look on Jim’s face, he strongly disagreed. He slowly edged away from the book, looking at it as if it carried a deadly disease.

Barbara sighed and set the book down “Jim.”

He raised his head at the authority in her tone.

“I promise that if you really don’t want to go camping. I’m not going to make you. But one day there might be an emergency where you *need* to leave the house at night. That’s why it’s important to get you comfortable with being outside,”

Jim squirmed in discomfort but made no other move to voice his displeasure.

“I want you to at least look at some of the parks and think about it. Can you do that for me?”

The silence stretched out for so long that Barbara wasn’t sure he would respond.

Finally Jim spoke up “….ok….”

“Thank you,” she smiled at him and held out her arms “Now how about a hug?”

Jim leaned forward and gently wrapped his arms around her, softly patting her back as opposed to squeezing her torso.

Barbara had no such reservations, pulling Jim into the tightest hug she could mange.

They had dealt with worse things; one way or another, the Lake family would get through this.

Eventually she broke the embrace and stood up off the couch “Ready

to work on some of those dishes kiddo?”

“I’ll come help in just a minute,” he said quietly.

Seeing that he needed some time and space to process everything that they’d brought up, Barbara replied with a nod and headed off into the kitchen.

Jim watched her leave room before shifting his gaze to the book. For a few minutes he just stared at it in silence. The soft clinks of bowls and silverware and the occasional splash of water floated over from the kitchen. After nearly five minutes had gone by, Jim tentatively reached out and picked up the book. He gave it one final apprehensive glance before he went to join his mother in the kitchen, taking the book with him.

Chapter End Notes

> And thus begins the tradition of the Lake family camping trip. This should be the last of the 'exposition dump' chapters, there's definitely going to be more action in upcoming chapters.
>
> Coming April 28th: Toby makes an appearance.

Nine

Chapter Summary

> Burning the candle at both ends means that sooner or later, you're going to run out of wax.

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: Barbara inadvertently puts herself, Jim, and Toby in peril.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jim woke up to the sound of the vacuum cleaner coming from downstairs. Blinking the sleep from his eyes he slowly sat up and stretched.

Mom had said that she wanted to get a lot of cleaning done on her day off, but she must have gotten up really early to get started before he was awake.

The good news was he had a whole hour before he had to go to school, that was plenty of time. Yawning, Jim walked down the hall and grabbed a rag and the cleaning spray from the closet. If he hurried he could wipe down the whole bathroom before he had to get dressed.

A few quick sprays to the bathroom counter and Jim was hard at work. He scrubbed away the dust and grime as fast as he could. Once the sun came up and he wasn't big and blue anymore cleaning wouldn't be as easy.

Halfway through, he heard the vacuum shut off. That made him feel a little better, Mom must be taking a break now.

His morning transformation caught him off guard, shrinking him down until his pajamas were practically falling off.

Quick as he could, Jim finished the bathroom and went back to his bedroom to change.

Dressed and ready for school, Jim walked down the stairs. He could hear Barbara talking on the phone in the kitchen. Jim knew it was wrong to eavesdrop on other people's' conversations, but she was being so loud he couldn't help but hear.

"Look, we've been through this. I. Can't. Work. Nights. Just schedule me for extra daytime hours to make up the difference, like we always do,"

Jim quietly stepped into the kitchen, he couldn't hear exactly what the person on the phone was saying, but they didn't sound happy.

"It has nothing to do with that, I just--" Barbara pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed "Yes, I'm sure your niece is a fantastic babysitter,"

The other person started talking again, whatever they said this time made his mom really mad "Stop it right there! I've been patient, but don't you *dare* tell me how to run my family," she snarled into the phone "You know my schedule so stick to it!"

Barbara slammed the phone back into the receiver and slumped against the counter, exhausted.

"Mom?"

Quick as a flash, she jerked upright and turned toward him, all evidence of tiredness gone now “Jim, what are you doing up so early?”

“It’s seven thirty,”

“Is it really?” she glanced at the clock on the microwave “Then I guess it’s time for breakfast,” not missing a beat, she went to the cabinet and got out two bowls and a box of cheerios.

Butterflies of worry fluttered around in Jim’s stomach while he watched Barbara pour their breakfast cereal. He thought she’d just gotten up really early to start on vacuuming, but now he wondered if she’d gone to bed at all.

Jim took a seat at the table, his mom set the bowls down, milk and cheerios combined, and slid one towards him before digging into her own bowl.

“I cleaned the upstairs bathroom,”

That caused Barbara to pause, before quickly going back to wolfing down her cereal “Oh really? Thank you Jim that’s very nice,”

Jim nervously stirred the cheerios around with his spoon “I can help with more things, I can do dishes and laundry,”

“Mm-hm,” Barbara replied without looking up.

“And….” he hesitated “You can leave me home alone so you can go to work at night,”

Barbara froze in her seat, spoonful of cheerios suspended in midair, it looked like her eyes were about to pop out of her skull.

Timidly, Jim continued “You don’t have to stay home with me every night, I can be by myself, I won’t get hurt or make a mess. I can even do some chores for you while--”

“Sweetie, it’s nice that you want to help me out,” Barbara interrupted “And I really appreciate everything you do for me, but you’re just not old enough to be home alone,”

“But….you only have to work so much because you only go to the clinic during the day, if you worked nights sometimes--”

“Jim.” Barbara cut him off in her ‘I’m losing my patience’ voice “How I do my job is *my* business, not yours,”

The sight of heavy, dark bags under her eyes gave Jim the courage to push further that he ever had with his mom “But you’re so tired all the time, if you left me by myself and went in to work at night you wouldn’t have to do so much and--”

“Jim,” her voice was steely “I’m the mom, going to work and getting chores done is my responsibility,” she reached across the table and laid a hand on his shoulder “Your job is to trust me to get everything done, not to worry, do you understand?”

Jim stayed silent.

“Jim. Do you understand?”

“Yes Mom,” he said defeatedly, knowing the discussion was over.

“Good,” she ruffled his hair “Now finish your cereal, I need to drop you and Toby off on my way to the store,”

The two of them finished their cheerios in silence; but on the inside, Jim was a bundle of nerves. Mom kept saying that he shouldn’t worry about her, but he couldn’t help it.

It seemed like that whenever she wasn’t working at the clinic, Barbara was busy keeping the house and the yard spick and span. At night, after chores were done and before they went to bed, she had started to collapse on the couch, barely moving and only speaking when he spoke to her. Jim did his best to help her out, doing what chores she would allow him, making sure she ate plenty of fruits and vegetables, only playing calm, quiet games with her at night. But it never felt like enough.

The cheerios roiled in his stomach, threatening to come back up. People *needed* rest and sleep to stay healthy. Mom was always telling him that, but whenever he tried to get her to take a break she always brushed him off, saying she was fine even though he knew she wasn’t.

Jim stared dejectedly down into his nearly empty bowl. Mom always said that none of it was his fault, but Jim knew it really was. The only reason she had to work so hard was to take care of him and help keep his secret.

Her life would be so much easier if Jim was a normal kid that didn't turn blue and grow horns at night.

Soon enough, breakfast was done, teeth were brushed, and the two of them were buckled into the car. Before heading out, Barbara drove over to the other side of the cul de sac where Toby was waiting.

Toby hopped in and joined Jim in the backseat "Morning Jim, Good morning Dr. Lake,"

"Good morning Toby," Barbara replied chipperly "You guys all buckled in?"

"Yep,"

"Uh huh,"

"Then off we go," she backed out of Toby's driveway and drove off.

The drive to school was the same as always. Same stop lights, same speed bumps, same canal. Toby was chatting about the new Gun Robot movie that was coming out, but Jim was barely listening.

His eyes kept drifting back to the back of his mom's car seat. She might have said he should leave all the worrying to her, but he couldn't help it.

He was pretty sure that Mom hadn't slept at all last night, and now she was going to spend her whole day off shopping and do housework,

and not getting any rest.

Jim hugged his backpack against his chest. He just wanted her to be ok.

“The car shouldn’t be here….” Toby said loudly, startling Jim out his thoughts.

He looked out the window, Toby was right, the car was in the middle of the road, not the side where it should be.

“Mom, why are you driving in the middle?”

Barbara didn’t respond, just sat still and kept driving straight down the road..

“C’mon Dr. Lake, if the cops see you drive here we’ll get in trouble!”

Again, no reply.

Straining against his seatbelt, Jim leaned forward as much as he could to get a better look at her.

“Mom?”

Barbara was slumped back in her seat with her head hanging down. As he watched a small snore escaped from her lips.

Jim's mouth hung open in disbelief. She was asleep.

Mom had fallen asleep while she was driving.

"Truck!"

Toby's cry snapped him out of his shock

Jim jerked his head back around, their car had drifted over far enough that it was now in the direct path of an oncoming semi-truck.

His heart shot up into his throat.

"Mom!"

They needed her to wake up and move the car.

"Mom, wake up!"

Toby joined in "Wake up Dr. Lake!"

I didn't work, she just kept snoring.

Jim and Toby shrieked and screamed and did everything they could to

rouse her. None of it worked. No matter how loud they were Barbara didn't stir.

Toby was crying now, Jim couldn't stop trembling all over.

The truck was close, *too* close, it would hit them in a matter of seconds.

Desperate, Jim did the one thing he was never supposed to do in the car; he unbuckled his seatbelt.

Unconstrained, Jim leapt forward and jerked on Barbara's arm.

" *Mom!* "

That *finally* did it.

Barbara jolted upright, eyes snapping open, just in time to see the truck.

She let out an ear-splitting shriek and yanked the wheel hard to the left, swerving the car out of the way just in time.

Sharp jolts jostled the car as it veered off road. Without his seat belt to hold him Jim nearly bounced out of his seat. Back on the street, the truck zoomed past them, blaring its horn as it went.

After going over a few more bumps, the car finally slowed to a stop.

None of them spoke, all still panting and shivering from the shock of their near miss.

Eventually, Barbara turned around to face the backseat “You boys ok back there?” she asked with a significant quiver to her voice.

All Jim could do was nod, it felt like his voice was stuck in his throat. None of his body parts wanted to work right.

Toby had no such restraints “The truck almost hit us!” he wailed “Why were you sleeping Dr. Lake?”

She blinked in shock for a few seconds at his words, before slowly collapsing in on herself.

“I….I….I’m sorry,” she said in a small, quiet voice.

Barbara crumpled into her seat, tears begining to drip down her cheeks.

“….I’m so sorry….”

Jim grinned while watching his mom pack up the last of her lunch, he had already changed for the night and he could feel his teeth against his lip when he smiled.

Barbara picked up her purse and turned to face him “Ok, let’s go over it one more time,”

Jim leaned forward to listen. She took a deep breath and started going over the rules they’d already discussed.

“Finish your homework before you do anything else, and if you decide to do any cooking, no using the oven or the stove. You need to be in bed ready to go to sleep by midnight, no matter what, got it?”

Jim nodded obediently.

Barbara handed him a sheet of notebook paper “Here’s a list of *optional* chores,” she put extra emphasis on the word ‘optional’ “Don’t feel like you have to do any of them,”

“Ok Mom,”

Despite what she said, Jim was already planning on having half the list done by the time he went to bed.

“And if there’s an earthquake or any kind of emergency where you have to leave the house, what do you do?”

He knew the answer by heart “Run into the woods and hide until sunrise, don’t come out for anyone besides you,”

She smiled at him “That’s my boy,”

Jim was practically giddy, and why wouldn't he be? Things were looking up for the first time in a long time.

His mom was finally getting some rest.

Yesterday, after dropping him and Toby off, she had gone straight home to take a nap. Then she had called work to change her schedule. Barbara was going to have to work at night sometimes, but she wouldn't have to put in near as many hours. No more being exhausted from work and chores all the time.

Jim could barely contain his joy, since she was leaving him by himself, he could finally help her the way he wanted.

Barbara glanced at her watch "I'm heading out now, if you have any problems, *anything* at all, call me,"

"Ok Mom,"

She kneeled down and kissed his forehead before making her way to the door "Bye sweetie, see you in the morning,"

"Bye Mom!"

"Call me if there's any problems,"

"Got it,"

“And remember if the dishwasher starts leaking, just open it to shut off the water,”

“Ok,”

She still lingered in the doorframe “I love you honey, see you tomorrow,”

“Love you to Mom,” Jim said while he gave her a wave goodbye as she finally, *finally* headed out the door.

And just like that, Jim had the house to himself for the night.

Wasting no time, Jim got to work. First he pulled out his homework, Mom wanted him to finish that first. It took him less than an hour to get it all done, with only one quick break to eat some dead batteries.

Homework completed, Jim looked over the chore list and tried to decide which chores would help his mom the most. He settled on cleaning the kitchen and vacuuming the couches.

It wasn’t hard at all, they kept the kitchen pretty clean already, and he could put Gun Robot on the TV while he did the couches. Even though he was taller when he was blue, the vacuum was still bigger than him. But once he got used to using it, the vacuuming turned out to be pretty easy to.

After putting the vacuum away, Jim decided to take a break and play for a bit. He’d done a lot already, and it wasn’t even ten o clock yet.

He had a little time before he started making lunches for tomorrow.

He got out the lego city he and Toby had started last weekend and quickly began adding new buildings to it. But a few minutes in he realized something was off.

Playing legos wasn't the same without someone to talk to and get ideas from and help him build things.

Toby wasn't here, his Mom wasn't here.

Jim was all by himself.

For the whole night.

The silence of the empty house pressed down on him, suffocating. Now that he thought about it, this was the first time he had ever been all alone in his house.

Jim thought back to all the hours he had before bedtime.

At first he had been thrilled to have so much time to play and do chores to help his Mom. But now, having all this time in the house by himself didn't feel exciting anymore.

It felt….lonely.

Chapter End Notes

One of the most dangerous things about being exhausted is that when you're up and moving around, you felt perfectly fine and not impaired at all. But the second you start slowing down, the tiredness can creep up on you and you can find yourself nodding off before you know it.

Some bad news, final exams are coming up, and my classes are well and truly kicking my ass. So unfortunately, the next update won't be for two weeks.

Coming May 12th: Jim has a handle on his transformation and Barbara has a good balance between work and rest. That means everything should be ok now, right?

Ten

Chapter Summary

The wide world encroaches.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara had to tiptoe to get the last sticky note on top of the ceiling fan. It was pretty far out of the way, but Jim had specifically told her he wanted it to be extra hard this year.

Right on time the doorbell rang, Barbara darted over to get the door. When she opened it Nancy Domzalski's smiling face greeted her.

The elderly woman proffered up a large baking dish covered in foil "I made a casserole, I figured the boys could use something to balance out all that sugar,"

"Thanks, come on in, the bus will drop them off any minute,"

Nancy stepped inside and handed over the pan "Just turn on the oven and put the casserole in. No need to bother with preheating, it's already fully cooked so it just needs warmed up,"

"Got it,"

Nancy got comfortable on the couch while Barbara went into the kitchen to pop the casserole in the oven. Right as she stood up from sliding the pan in, she saw the bus pull into the cul de sac through the window. Almost immediately after it came to a stop, a werewolf and a zombie jumped off and ran up to the door.

“Trick or treat!” the zombie shouted while letting himself in.

“That’s not til later Toby,” the werewolf corrected.

Nana pulled herself off the couch and greeted the two with a hug “Did you boys have fun at school today?”

“Yep,” Jim answered for both of them “Each class made a jack-o-lantern and did math with the seeds, then we had our Halloween party!”

“Check out our loot!” Toby said proudly while holding up a large plastic bag, practically bursting with candy.

“That’s quite a bit of candy, especially considering you went to the trunk or treat last Saturday,” Nana was clearly of the opinion that the amount of sweets had crossed the threshold into too much “Maybe you should donate some this year,”

The boys exchanged panic-stricken looks while protectively clutching their bags.

Seeing their horrified reactions to the thought of a few less Nougat Nummies drew a chuckle out of Barbara.

“It’s your candy boys, you can do what you want with it,” she joined them in the living room and held out a sticky note “Now why don’t you get started on the scavenger hunt,”

Jim gleefully snatched up the offered note " *Your next clue is hidden somewhere bread goes in, but doesn't come out* ,"

Toby's face instantly lit up "I know, the toaster!"

And with that, they were off, racing eagerly from clue to clue while dragging Barbara and Nancy in toe. Twice Barbara had to make them stop so that poor Nancy could catch her breath from all the scurrying back and forth.

After what seemed like hours of going from note to note, but was probably closer to forty minutes, the boys found the final clue stuck on top of the ceiling fan.

Toby read it this time " *I'm cold and hot and warm, and I spin around and around* ,"

They struggled with this one for longer than the others. After a few minutes of puzzling over it Jim gave her a beseeching look "Can we get a hint Mom?"

"Let's see," Barbara tapped her chin and made a show of thinking it over

" *Please* Dr. Lake,"

"Ok," she relented "The part that's hot and cold and warm is water,"

It only took them a few seconds to put one and two together.

“The washing machine!” Toby cried out.

They made a mad dash to the basement door and sprinted down, taking the stairs two steps at a time.

“Slow down boys,” Barbara said while following them into the basement, albeit at a far more relaxed pace, with Nancy just a few steps behind her “It’s not going anywhere,”

The boys had already pried open the washing machine lid and pulled out their prize; a plastic cauldron containing DVDs of scary but age appropriate movies and full size candy bars.

“Awesomesauce!”

“This is the greatest!” Jim gushed “Thanks Mom,”

“Thank you Dr. Lake,” Toby parroted.

“You’re welcome,” Barbara gestured to the elderly woman behind her “Don’t forget to thank Nana, she got you the DVD’s,”

Toby and Jim dutifully recited their thanks to Nana before running upstairs, did they really have to do *everything* at a breakneck pace, to make simultaneous use of the candy bars and movies.

Barbara made to follow them, only to be stopped by a gentle hand on her shoulder. She turned to face Nancy, who looked troubled, but determined.

“Barbara, can we talk?”

A nest of butterflies burst to life in her stomach.

The melancholy look on Nancy’s face, waiting until the boys were gone, isolating the two of them in the basement. She had a feeling this was not going to be a light, casual conversation.

“Oh….ok,” she leaned back against the banister while Nancy took a seat on a box of old textbooks “What’s going on?”

Nancy let out a deep breath “I want you and Jim to go trick or treating with us this year,”

Barbara stood rooted to her spot, paralyzed by dread and desperate not to show it.

This was exactly the conversation she did *not* want to be having.

Nancy continued “I know how much you must want to keep Jim close to you, to keep him safe, especially after losing his father,”

Barbara opened her mouth to refute that statement only for the elderly woman to hold up a hand, effectively silencing her before she could get a word out “I know, you didn’t lose James the way I lost

Ralph, but loss is loss,”

“Nancy….”

“Doing this by yourself is hard, and believe me, I understand the urge to hold him tight and keep him from ever being hurt,” she looked desperately into Barbara’s eyes “But being cloistered and protected from everything….that’s no way to live,”

Nancy’s next words cut her deeper than any knife ever could.

“So please, come with us tonight,”

Barbara couldn’t speak; throat closed off with emotion, she kept staring down at the basement floor as if it held all the answers to her problems. It took every last drop of her concentration to keep her facial expression and body language neutral. She wasn’t completely successful, the cool, wet sensation on her palm told her that fist had tightened to the point her fingernails had broken the skin.

If only she knew.

Sometimes Barbara almost managed to convince herself that Jim’s blue form existed in its own bubble, confined to regular hours with no impact on the rest of their lives. It was only when incidents like this happened that the ugly truth was forced back into her face.

Jim’s nightly metamorphosis sent out ripples that affected every aspect of their lives. Everything they did revolved around keeping his transformation a secret. These unusual routines did not go unnoticed. Others saw how they lived, and recognized it for what it was,

abnormal.

Nancy wasn't the first person to approach her about her supposed overprotectiveness of Jim. Hell, she wasn't even the first person to imply that she did it due to baggage from her *dearly* departed ex-husband.

As much as it stung her pride, as much as Barbara yearned to scream that she hadn't given that bastard a thought in years….it was too damn convenient.

If people assumed they knew the truth, that Barbara kept her son close due to abandonment issues from being left by James, they wouldn't dig any deeper.

It made her burn with shame every time someone suggested it, but it was safer than the alternative. If she corrected them they might start looking into why exactly Barbara Lake never let her son out at night. And that could lead to someone finding out she left her ten year old home alone for hours on a regular basis. That would bring in social services and CPS investigations and police. And somewhere down that line, Jim's blue form would be discovered.

And that would open up an even uglier can of worms.

Barbara raised her head, forcing herself to look Nancy in the eye.

It wasn't that she mistrusted the elderly woman, far from it. Ever since Nancy had moved in across the cul de sac, she had been a constant source of comfort and companionship to Barbara. They shared a connection as two women who unexpectedly found themselves raising children without any other family to help. Barbara considered Nancy one of her closest and dearest friends.

But there were certain aspects of people that never came to light until they were put through trial by fire.

Barbara wanted so badly to believe that Nancy would continue to be the kind, generous woman that she was upon learning about Jim's metamorphosis, but she couldn't gamble his safety on the alternative.

She gave Nancy a small smile, hoping it didn't look as forced as it felt

"Thank you for the offer, but my answer is no, Jim and I will be spending Halloween at home the way we always do,"

There was no explosion following her refusal, no debating or bargaining.

Nancy didn't look sad or angry or even surprised; just disappointed, so very disappointed.

"Alright," she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper "But maybe next year?,"

"Maybe next year," Barbara replied, knowing full well her answer would be the same next October.

Deep down, she thought Nancy knew that to.

They trudged up the basement stairs in silence, emerging to the joyful

noise of the boys wolfing down their candy bars over the sound of the DVD they had started.

In an effort to maintain a casual mood, Barbara went into the kitchen with Nancy to pull out the casserole. They managed to get the boys to each have a serving of the dish before they went straight back to gorging themselves on candy.

Meal complete, Nancy poured them two cups of tea and the two women started making idle conversation. It almost felt like one of the many casual evenings the Lakes and Domzalski's spent together, almost.

A barrier had gone up between Barbara and Nancy, like a sheet of glass separating the two women. And as much as she wanted to remove it, Barbara knew that to take down the glass would be to risk her son's life.

She kept one eye on the clock at all times, and soon enough, it was fifteen minutes to sundown and the credits were rolling on the boys' movie. Time to send the Domzalski's on their way.

Barbara stood up and went into the living room, picking up the remote to halt the scrolling credits "Alright guys, it's been fun, but now it's time to wrap things up for the night,"

Protesting only slightly, Jim and Toby gathered up the spoils from their school party and scavenger hunt and soon Barbara was escorting the Nancy and Toby to the front door.

"Thanks for coming over tonight, be sure to have fun trick-or-treating,"

“Happy Halloween Dr. Lake,” Toby gave a quick wave goodbye before dashing out onto the sidewalk, already eager to get a head start on his trick or treating.

Nana still lingered by the door, she placed her hand on the frame before Barbara could shut it “Come with us,” she begged “Both of you. Please.”

The only reason Barbara was able to keep her emotions in check in that moment was years of practice.

“Have a good night Nancy,” she shut the door, slowly but firmly.

She waited a few seconds, to make sure that they had walked away and weren’t still standing right outside, before sliding the deadbolt into place.

Barbara let out the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. Another holiday over and done with no incident.

She didn’t know whether to be relieved that the song and dance was over, or dejected that that’s what holidays had become to them.

The sound of the Gun Robot theme song saved her from deciding. Jim had put on cartoons and was still tucking into his candy, no doubt to take his mind off the fact that he was going to spend the rest of Halloween alone. Figuring she was in need of a distraction herself, Barbara went into the kitchen to clean up the casserole dishes.

A few minutes later she heard Jim call out from the living room.

“Mom….I need help,”

Jim was fairly independent for his age, asking for help like this meant that he was really in a fix. Dropping what she was doing, Barbara went into the next room to see what the problem was.

Jim was still sitting on the couch in his werewolf costume, only now it didn’t appear to fit the way it should.

“Did you get stuck in your costume after you changed?”

“Uh huh,”

So that was the issue, Jim had transformed while he was still wearing his costume and now it he couldn’t get out of it on his own.

“Hold still honey, I’ll give you a hand,”

The shirt and gloves came off easy enough, but the straps of the mask had gotten tangled up in his horns. For a while she thought that she might have to cut them to get it off, but eventually she was able to detangle it.

Barbara took note of Jim’s horns as she smoothed his hair. The tops of them were peeking out of his hair now, and if she wasn’t mistaken they were starting to thicken and develop a slight curve as they grew.

At this point it was anyone's guess what shape they'd be by the time Jim stopped growing

"All better kiddo?"

"....yeah…..," Jim replied while looking glumly down at his candy, now rendered inedible, effectively ending the holiday for him.

Or so he thought.

Barbara smirked "That's good because I have one more surprise for you," going over the closet, she reached in and pulled out a large gift bag.

"Here you go,"

Wide eyed, Jim tore into the bag and pulled out a pair of heavily used work boots. A jubilant smile spread across his face "Cool Mom, Thanks!"

In a move that surprised her, Jim reached around to the floor on the other side of the couch, picking up a ziploc bag full of butterscotch and Kit Kats, her personal favorites, and held it out in her direction.

"These are for you,"

Moved by his generosity, Barbara tried to graciously decline "Jim,

that’s your Halloween candy--”

“And I can do what I want with it,” he continued holding out the bag, determined that she take it.

Barbara knew when she was beaten “Thank you Jim,” she accepted the bag “Do you want to start another movie?”

“Yuh huh,” he mumbled past the steel toe now wedged between his teeth “Ocus Pucus,”

Barbara popped the DVD into the player and sat back on the couch with Jim reflexively curling up against her side. She put an arm around his shoulders and gave Jim a gentle squeeze “Happy Halloween kiddo,”

The opening credits started to roll, Jim finished chewing and swallowed the steel toe of the boot, “Happy Halloween Mom,”

Chapter End Notes

Happy mothers day! A Halloween chapter isn't exactly fitting with the season at the moment, but just give it five more months.

Spring classes are over, finally, so it should be regular updates for the next month. In June I start my post-grad program. I'm hoping to be able to keep up weekly updates after it starts, but I'm not sure how intense it will be, so I can't promise anything right now.

Eleven

Chapter Summary

A step forward and a mile back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ok everyone, keep your eyes on your teacher and don’t let go of your partner’s hand,” the chaperone called out as they got off the bus.

Jim clasped his hand to Toby’s and followed their class off the bus. They were old enough that they shouldn’t have to hold hands on field trips, but it wasn’t worth arguing with their teacher about it.

Their teacher, Mr. Rhodes, had gathered their class at the main gate and had started talking about the gold rush and how this mine was important and historical. Other kids kept trying to interrupt him and ask when they could see the gift shop.

Jim glanced ahead and got his first view of the mine. It was tough to miss; a giant hole carved into the side of the mountain leading down into the earth.

Once the whole class was there, Mr. Rhodes led them to the entrance of the gold mine. Then they had to stop and wait for half the class to go to the bathroom and *then* they had to listen to Mr. Rhodes give another long-winded lecture about safety and how important it was that they followed the rules inside the mine.

This was always the most boring part of field trips, he had just started and half the class was yawning already. While tuning out Mr. Rhodes, Jim found himself reading the big sign right outside the mine

entrance. It was actually pretty interesting, more than Mr. Rhodes anyway. According to the sign, there were strange creatures called Tommyknockers that lived inside the mine.

Mr. Rhodes finally stopped talking and started leading the class inside the mine. Jim stayed where he was, wanting to finish reading about the Tommyknockers.

Toby nervously tugged on Jim's hand "Hurry up Jim, they're going to leave us behind,"

Jim shrugged him off "Go ahead, I'll catch up when I'm done,"

Toby squirmed for a bit before dropping Jim's hand and darting off to catch up with the class, leaving Jim alone outside.

Jim eyes scanned the lines of text and pictures on the sign. Apparently there had been a bunch of strange noises and sightings of weird creatures in the mines, the miners had called the creatures Tommyknockers. And the miners believed that if they left them presents, the Tommyknockers would protect them from cave-ins.

Once he was finished reading, Jim stood in place for a while, pondering over what he'd just read.

Were the Tommyknockers real? Not pretend-real like Santa Claus or the Tooth fairy, but *really* real. He was pretty sure most people would say that they weren't, and that they were just figments of the miners' imagination. But Jim knew better than most people that there were strange, magical things in the world that defied explanation.

Jim looked ahead at his retreating class. They were really far into the mine now. If he didn't catch up with them soon he'd be in big trouble.

Knowing he only had a short time before Mr. Rhodes noticed he was behind, Jim ran into the mine. He sprinted into the rough-hewn cave, the air turning cool and stale as he descended into the earth, gravel crunching underneath his sneakers. In no time at all, Jim was at the back of the class, he could even see Toby walking a just little ahead of him. Relieved and panting from exertion, Jim slowed to a walk. He was just about to announce himself to Toby when he felt something.

Something he'd only ever felt at sundown.

The shock was enough to stop Jim in his tracks.

He looked down at his hands.

They were blue.

Jim could feel the blood rushing in his ears.

He flexed his arms and raised his shoulders.

His clothes were too tight.

With trembling hands Jim reached up into his hair.

His horns were out.

Jim frantically looked back at the entrance, staring in disbelief at the bright sunshine pouring in through the cave mouth.

He had changed.

In the middle of the day.

“Hey Jim, do you think any miners are buried in here?”

Toby’s question brought Jim crashing back down to reality.

If anyone in his class turned around right now or if anyone new came into the mine they’d be able to see his blue form.

He needed to get out of here *now* .

Jim spun around and bolted for the entrance, barely aware of another shift happening as he rushed out, not stopping until he made it back to the sign, gasping for air. He looked down at his hands; they were soft and fleshy. He raised and lowered his shoulders; his clothes fit again. Nervously, Jim reached into his hair; no more horns.

He was back to normal.

Jim slumped to the ground, limp with relief.

He was normal again.

But why had he turned blue, it was the *day* ! He was only supposed to turn blue at night, why had he transformed now?

“Jim, get back with the group!” Mr. Rhodes shouted from the cave.

A sharp spike of fear instantly immobilized Jim against the ground. His heart threatened to beat out of his chest.

He couldn’t go back in there. Jim had only turned blue when he’d gone into the cave. If he went back in there, he might turn blue again.

In public, where people could *see* him.

And if people saw him they’d yell and scream and call the police.

And if the police came they’d lock him in a cell and call the government. Then the government would send men in black to come and take him away and never let him see his mom or Toby ever again.

“Jim!”

The anger in Mr. Rhodes’ voice was enough to snap Jim out of his paralysis, he scrambled to his feet and ran in the opposite direction of the mine entrance.

He didn’t care about how mad Mr. Rhodes was going to get or how

much trouble he would be in.

He couldn't go back in the mine, he just couldn't!

Barbara only had six minutes left in her lunch break and her burrito was lukewarm and getting colder by the second. But neither of those things mattered as much as the single line of text on her laptop screen.

After years of research she had finally found it.

The same name that came up in the obituary, the census, and the housing record. The person who had died and left a cursed bath bomb among their belongings to be sold at an estate sale and purchased by Barbara.

Sarah Good.

Barbara could feel her pulse pounding in her ears, her hands shook as she scrolled down the screen. They had a name now, an identity, a human being to connect to the object that had destroyed both of their lives. She could track down this woman's family, get some answers, find out where that damned bath bomb had come from in the first place.

And figure out how to undo whatever it had done to Jim.

"Dr Lake?" the receptionist called from down the hall, startling Barbara out of the rapture of her discovery.

In an irrational bout of paranoia Barbara shut the laptop, not that there was anything wrong with looking at old censuses and housing records, but it never hurt to be cautious, and headed over to the desk "What is it?"

The receptionist nervously held out the phone "A phone call….about your son?"

Switching gears from Dr. Lake to Mom, Barbara took the offered phone phone and held it to her ear "Hello?"

"Is this Mrs. Barbara Lake?" a female voice asked.

"Yes, and it's Dr. Lake, "

"I'm one of the chaperones for Jim's class….," the voice hesitated "I'm not really sure what to tell you…."

That wasn't reassuring at all.

"Is Jim ok?"

"He's fine….physically,"

Barbara felt her heart rate triple "What happened?"

“Well everything was going fine an hour ago, right up until we started the gold mine tour….then he just….freaked out,”

It was getting harder and harder to resist snapping at this woman “What do you mean ‘freaked out’?”

“He just started screaming and crying and refused to go into the mine, I don’t know what’s happening with him,”

“Where is Jim now?”

The chaperone hesitated before answering “….He’s in the visitor’s center with one of the teachers….I think he’s still pretty messed up,”

Barbara nearly dropped the phone, Jim had been having some kind of breakdown for over an hour and they were only now just calling her?

“So is this a regular thing for Jim? Because if it is--”

“I’m coming down there,”

That caught the chaperone off guard “Oh, well….I’m not really sure if--”

Barbara hung up. The chaperone was probably just doing best she could, she didn’t deserve to have Barbara curse her out.

As fast as she could, Barbara signed out with her supervisor and went

to her car, heart pounding the entire time. What could have happened on the field trip, what could have upset Jim so badly?

The mine was an hour away, but by playing fast and loose with the speed limit, Barbara managed to make it there in just over forty minutes.

By the time she pulled into gold mine's parking lot she was a nervous wreck, all of the potential misfortunes that could have befallen Jim flashed through her mind.

Barbara stepped out of the car and all but ran to the visitor's center. A young woman in a t-shirt with the school's logo was standing outside looking at her phone.

"Are you one of the chaperones?"

She jerked her head up, startled by Barbara's sudden appearance "Oh--yeah that's me," she looked back towards her phone "I've been trying to Google ways to help kids calm down, so do you know if this is a panic attack or--"

"Is Jim still inside the visitor's center?"

Right as she finished asking, the muffled sound of raised voices wafted out of the aforementioned building.

The chaperone at least had the grace to look sheepish "He is, but I don't--"

Ignoring anything else the chaperone had to say, Barbara dashed past her and opened the door, instantly making the muted shouts crystal clear.

"--acting like a goddamn baby!"

The visitors center was composed of a medium sized room with a small service desk. Over in the corner Jim was sitting on the floor, arms wrapped around his knees and tears streaming down his cheeks, while one of his teachers, Rhodes if she remembered right, stood over him yelling.

Seeing a grown man shouting down at her son, who was clearly crying his eyes out, brought out a dark, primal emotion in her. One that demanded she decapitate this man on the spot.

Barbara stormed over to them, forcing down any violent urges "Don't you *dare* talk to my son that way!"

Jim instantly perked up at the appearance of his mother while Rhodes practically jumped out of his skin, spooked by the anger in her voice.

"Mrs. Lake? What are you--"

"It's *Doctor* Lake," she cut him off, practically spitting venom "Now tell me what's going on."

"Oh-- I-- it's…." Rhodes stammered for a reply "We were heading into the mine when Jim started panicking out of the blue, we tried to ask him what was wrong but he won't say,"

“Let me talk to him,” Barbara walked past Rhodes and bent down to be at Jim’s level.

Without preamble Jim scrambled upright and threw his arms around her neck. Surprised by the sudden contact, Barbara froze for a few seconds before she returned the embrace.

Jim was in middle school, very much not a little boy anymore, something truly awful must have happened to send him running to her like this

“Can you tell me what happened Jim?”

Jim stiffened in her arms at the question, before slowly leaning up to whisper in her ear.

“I turned blue,”

Now it was Barbara’s turn to go rigid with shock.

Jim had transformed….

How !? It was the middle of the day in August. Jim should have been his normal self for a good six hours more. What on earth could have caused this to happen?

Barbara was faintly aware of Rhodes babbling about something in the

background.

She couldn't do this. Not here. Not in public. Not with other people around.

She needed to get them somewhere private *now* .

"I'm taking Jim home," she interrupted his ramble.

It took Rhodes a few seconds to register her words "What?"

"Jim and I are *leaving* ." Barbara stood up and grasped Jim's hand, pulling him after her as she briskly strode towards the exit.

Seeing them head toward the door snapped Rhodes into action "Hey wait-- You can't just leave during the middle of a field trip," he started chasing after them "You need to fill out a release form!"

Barbara ignored him and strode out the door, Jim in toe. They made brisk progress walking across the parking lot and were soon at her car.

Rhodes ran up to the car just as they were getting in, shouting more nonsense about excused absences and official documents.

Barbara slammed the car door shut, nearly catching Rhodes' nose. If it weren't for Jim's presence, she would tell him exactly where he could shove his excused absence forms.

The instant they both were buckled in, Barbara started the car and pulled out of her parking spot. Ignoring the hysterical teacher, she turned out of the lot and drove down the side road away from the mine.

Driving did little to settle her nerves. Her hands were shaking badly, Jim had curled up into an unmoving ball on the seat next to her. Panic reaching its crescendo, Barbara nearly missed the exit for the highway.

She shouldn't be driving right now. She needed to find somewhere to pull over, to calm down, to talk to Jim, figure out *exactly* what had happened.

As soon as Barbara spotted a semi-reputable looking gas station, she pulled over, put the car in park, and killed the engine.

Gripping the steering wheel, Barbara shut her eyes and took deep breaths; five seconds in, hold for five, five seconds out. Ready to present a calm and collected front, she turned towards Jim in the passenger seat "Ok, tell me what happend, from start to finish,"

Jim took a few shaky breaths before he answered her.

"It happened when I walked into the mine, I went inside and…." he trailed off "I just changed…."

"That's it? You just changed after going inside the cave?"

Jim nodded in response, face still gaunt and pale from fear.

Barbara herself was frozen in her seat; paralyzed with shock and disbelief, fighting back the urge to scream.

How could Jim change during the day? This had never happened before, not at home, not while camping, not ever. He was only supposed to transform at night!

Or was he?

They had come to the conclusion that Jim only turned blue at night because that was the pattern his transformation followed. It wasn't as if his blue form came with an instruction manual that described exactly where and when he changed. For all they knew, standing on the international date line could cause him to change.

But what *had* caused it? Did it have something to do with being in the mine? Why, was it the gold ore? Would he change in any cave? Or was it being underground that changed him, but that didn't make sense Jim had been down in the basement without--

A slight touch to the back of her fingers pulled Barbara out of her whirlwind of panic.

Jim had reached out to grasp her hand with his and was now looking up at her, peaked face a mask of worry, making him look so much younger than his eleven years.

Barbara somehow found the will to slow the maelstrom of questions swirling in her mind.

She couldn't go to pieces, no matter how much she wanted to. Jim might be in middle school now, but he still looked to his mother for strength. No matter how terrifying this was, Barbara needed to figure out how to keep it together, for Jim.

And right now, they needed a plan of action.

"Ok. Here's what we're going to do," she exhaled deeply "I'll plan our next few camping trips near old mines and caves, to see if we can figure out a common factor between them that makes you change. Until then, no going underground anywhere new, sound good?"

Jim smiled weakly "Sounds good,"

Barbara gave his fingers a reassuring squeeze and looked back out at the road "Since it's still early and you don't have to go back to school, what do you say we go out for a late lunch in the city?"

That caused Jim to perked right up in his seat "Really?"

"You betcha, I'll even let you pick the restaurant,"

"Awesome! Thanks Mom,"

She smiled, glad that he was feeling better enough to be enthused about a meal out "You're very welcome, now buckle up so we can head out,"

Jim clicked his seat belt shut, allowing Barbara to pull back out onto

the highway and start heading towards the city, willing with all her might that the dread and terror of their new discovery stayed behind them.

Chapter End Notes

The gold rush happened, earthquakes are a thing. Thus concludes my knowledge of California.

For this chapter, actually had to ask my Mom, who is a kindergarten teacher, about how teachers on a field trip would handle this situation. I was surprised when she told me that they wouldn't call the parent first thing, but as I thought about it it makes sense. Unless the child in question is physically harmed or has a known condition like, anxiety, ADHD, or epilepsy, there's really no reason to get the parent involved.

Thus necessitating the teacher making the situation worse and a chaperone that doesn't really know what to do so they call mom.

Twelve

Chapter Summary

On the outside looking in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He'd been awake for a while, but right now he perfectly was content to stay lying underneath the covers with his eyes shut, enjoying the feeling of being snug and cozy.

All too soon his blissful rest was interrupted by a hand on his shoulder, nudging him into full consciousness.

He groaned and rolled over, refusing to open his eyes "Five more minutes Nana,"

"But Toby-pie, don't you remember what today is?"

Instantly it all came back to him, his eyes shot open.

"Today's my birthday!" Toby practically leapt out of bed, all traces of lethargy gone.

Nana beamed at him "That's right, now come downstairs and have your breakfast, Jim and Barbara will be here in less than an hour,"

Toby ran downstairs with Nana following closely behind him. For breakfast he popped some eggo waffles into the toaster while Nana

mixed herself some granola and berries. He wolfed down his breakfast as quickly as he could, eyeing the wrapped presents sitting on the counter, Tonight he would open them after having the cake that was nestled in back of the fridge. Much to Toby's delight, one of the wrapped boxes was the exact same size and shape as the magic kit he'd been asking for.

It was his big one-two, twelve years old, and Toby was going to have the best birthday ever.

Noticing the time, he swalloed his last bite of waffles and ran upstairs to get ready. Right as he was finishing brushing his teeth he heard the front door open, letting him know that Dr. Lake and Jim's had arrived.

As Toby came down the stairs he saw that they had brought several more presents that were added to the pile.

"Are you sure you don't want to come Nancy?"

"Oh I'm quite sure," Nana replied "At my age all that walking around in the sun isn't good for me, I'll be able to see you all again tonight,"

Jim was the first one to notice Toby "Happy birthday Tobes! You ready to go?"

"You bet," Toby replied with a grin, he had been looking forward to this all week.

Soon goodbyes were said, water bottles packed, sunscreen applied, and seatbelts were buckled; and the three of them were off.

Toby was practically bouncing in his seat with excitement. For his birthday Dr. Lake had gotten him and Jim fast passes at Disneyland for today *and* tomorrow.

He looked back and forth between Jim and Dr. Lake as she pulled the car onto the highway.

Toby was grateful for the Fast Passes, he really was, but he was hoping he could get something else for his birthday to.

“Hey, Dr. Lake,”

“Yes Toby,”

“Since we're going to Disneyland tomorrow to, and since it’s my birthday….” he really hoped that they took what he said next well “Can Jim and I have a sleepover at my house? Nana says it’s ok,”

Invite Jim over, don’t invite yourself over to his house, that was very important.

Dr. Lake and Jim froze in their seats. Toby fidgeted self conciously. He knew that Jim’s mom had a rule against sleepovers, but they weren’t little kids anymore. They were both twelve now, and they should be allowed to spend the night at each other’s houses.

“I’m sorry Toby,” Dr. Lake said apologetically “But we can’t do that,”

“B-- but we wouldn’t do anything against the rules like watch R-rated movies or eat a bunch of junk food. And our houses are really close together, if there was an emergency, we could get to your house really fast and--”

“I’m sorry Toby, but the answer is no,” Dr. Lake’s tone was still remorseful, but it brooked no argument.

Toby glanced over to Jim, waiting for him to speak up, to say that he wanted to have a sleepover with Toby, that he was old enough and he should be allowed to spend the night at his best friend’s house.

But he didn’t. Jim just sat there with his head hanging down, not saying anything.

Uncomfortable, Toby let the subject drop and they finished the rest of their drive in silence.

Once they pulled into the Disneyland parking lot the celebratory mood returned.

The three of them got out of the car and walked to the entrance. Toby felt his excitement building as he could start to see all the rides and roller coasters on the other side of the fence, although not enough to make him forget his unsuccessful attempt at inviting Jim over.

As they waited in line Dr. Lake went over the Disneyland rules again “Remember boys, stay together no matter what and don’t leave a ride unless I’m with you, got it?”

“Yep,”

“Got it,”

Tickets purchased and wristbands applied, they stepped through the gate into the park. Toby felt increasingly giddy as he looked around at all the rides and games and stores. Everything looked so fun! He couldn’t decide what he wanted to do first.

Not for the first time, Toby remembered just how lucky he was to have an awesome friend like Jim that had a cool mom that did stuff like this for their birthdays.

Some days Toby liked to think his parents sent Jim and Dr. Lake to him.

“Alright birthday boy, where to first?” Dr. Lake asked.

He thought about it for a little while “Splash Mountain,”

It was one of his favorites, and had a long smooth water ride before it got to the splash, making it perfect for the other thing he had planned.

They hustled over to the ride and thanks to their Fast Passes, it was no time at all before they were getting strapped in.

Dr. Lake waved to them as their log boat pulled away “Have fun boys, I’ll meet you at the exit,”

Toby and Jim waved back to her as the current slowly pulled them out of sight. Jim excitedly glanced around at the surroundings of the ride, but Toby kept his eyes locked on Jim, his mind somewhere else entirely.

They were alone now, away from Dr. Lake and his Nana. Now was the perfect time to finally get some answers.

“Hey Jim,”

“Yeah?”

“Why can’t you have sleepovers?”

Jim did a double take, clearly blindsided by the question “Oh, well….because Mom says it’s not healthy to sleep somewhere that’s not your bed,”

Toby frowned, he might not have made the junior honor roll, but even he knew that was a load of hooey “But practically everyone we know has slept over at someone's’ house and they’re all just fine. And besides, we’re not little anymore, you should be allowed to stay overnight,”

Jim squirmed under the security bar “Sorry Tobes, I just can’t do sleepovers,”

Toby’s face fell, Jim and Toby had been friends since kindergarten, they’d been through thick and thin together and they always had each other’s backs. But when Jim’s mom wouldn’t let him have a sleepover at his house he just accepted it? Without even protesting just a little?

“Jim do you even *want* to have a sleepover with me?”

Shock and horror flew across Jim’s face “Of course I do!” he shouted “It’s just that-- I can’t,”

“But *why not* ?”

“*Because I can’t* !”

Any further discussion was lost in the roar of water as the ride dropped them down the side of the hill, summoning a huge wave and drenching the both of them.

Before Toby could pick up the conversation the ride pulled to a stop. Jim hastily wriggled out of his seat and ran over to where his mom was waiting at the exit.

Toby slowly followed him over to where Dr. Lake was, still feeling numb from his botched confrontation. He was dimly aware of her asking him what ride they should go on next. Toby managed to mumble out a coherent reply and Dr. Lake began shepherding them down the sidewalk towards the next ride.

Too late he realized that the ride he had suggested was on the other side of the park, and they had to walk the entire length of it before they could get on the ride and he could talk to Jim alone again.

For his part, Jim stayed withdrawn and silent. Non-responsive to Dr. Lake’s cheerful chatter.

Toby forced back the doubts that had started to worm their way into the back of his mind, his best friend in the world could never stay over after dark and he deserved an explanation. And if asking questions upset Jim, well tough toenails.

At long last they got to the ride. Despite the fact that they were sporting Fast Passes, it seemed to take forever to get to the front of the ride and have Dr. Lake send them off.

But finally, *finally* , they were alone again.

Jim avoided meeting his eyes. Toby stared him down, undaunted, if Jim thought he could weasel his way out this he had another thing coming.

“For real Jim, why can’t you ever spend the night,”

“I….I just can’t….”

Toby wasn’t satisfied “Yeah but *why* , why can’t you?”

Jim’s mouth opened and shut for a few seconds as he floundered for words.

“Come on Jim, tell me the truth!”

Tense, uncomfortable silence stretched out between them, the only

sound the clicking of the car along the track as the ride carried them forward. Toby crossed his arms and fixed Jim with the sternest glare he could muster. No more evasions or excuses. He needed to know why his best friend never put up a fight when his mom wouldn't let him stay over.

After nearly a full minute of silence, Jim finally whimpered out a response.

".....it's a secret…."

Toby narrowed his eyes "What do you mean a secret?"

Jim squirmed and looked away.

Toby bit back an aggravated sigh and scooted closer to him under the safety bar "Jim, I'm your best friend, whatever your secret is, you can tell me,"

"....I can't…." Jim whispered in a tone that was barely audible

"Why *not* ?"

"....I….I….I just…."

A sob bubbled out of Jim's throat

Only now did Toby notice that Jim was crying

“….you don’t understand,” Jim hiccuped out past his tears “I want to tell you but I can’t….”

Toby gaped at him in stunned silence, horrified by this turn of events.

He made Jim cry, on his birthday.

Toby wanted answers, but not like this.

Jim was Toby’s best friend, always had been, always will be. So maybe Toby should start acting like his friend. So what if Jim had a secret; Toby had secrets, things even Jim didn’t know. Like when he’d lost the key to the art cabinet at school, or when he couldn’t find a trash can at the carnival and ended up putting his funnel cake wrapper in the first car that had a window rolled down.

If Jim had a secret reason for not having sleepovers, like maybe he wet the bed or maybe he couldn’t sleep away from his mom, Toby would let him keep it. Being friends meant that they respected each other’s privacy. And one day, maybe soon, Jim was sure to trust Toby with his secret. But until then Toby would be patient.

That’s what best friends did.

“Ok,”

Jim raised his head and wiped his face with the back of his hand “Ok what?”

“It’s ok that you can’t have a sleepover,” he flashed Jim his most reassuring smile “We can spend the night talking on our walkie-talkies while playing video games, like we always do,”

Jim still looked anxious and uneasy “Are you sure?”

“Positive, whatever your secret is, just tell me when you’re ready,”

“….thank you…..,” even through the snuffling of unshed tears, Toby could still hear the overwhelming gratitude in Jim’s voice.

Toby held out his fist “Don’t mention it Jimbo,”

Jim gave a warbly grin and lightly bumped Toby’s fist with his own.

“Right back at you Tobes,”

Right on queue, the ride pulled to a stop and the safety bar popped up.

Toby stepped out of the car and turned around to help Jim out “Let’s not worry about it anymore, it’s my birthday, I want us to have fun,”

Jim nodded and accepted his hand “Sounds great Tobes, let’s go have fun,”

As they walked away from the ride exit to meet up with Dr. Lake, Toby forced himself to forget about all his doubts and suspicions.

Whatever weird rules Jim’s mom had about when he could and couldn’t go out didn’t matter. From now on Toby would be a good friend to Jim. No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

Not a lot of action happens in this chapter, but it does show two important parts of the dynamic established between the Lakes and Domzalski's.

First off Barbara has a tendency to go overboard on holidays and birthdays, more or less spoiling Jim and Toby. She does this because she feels so guilty that Jim can't do a lot of fun things normal kids can do, such as trick or treating and sleepovers. So she tries to make up for it by going the extra mile on the things he can do.

Second is just how good Toby gets at justifying the Lake's living situation to himself. Because things have been this way ever since he was five, it's more or less normal to him. And even when it goes beyond something he can rationalize, Toby loves them and is so loyal to the people that are basically family to him, that he just tells himself it's just how the Lakes roll and he shouldn't be judgemental.

Unfortunately, do to the combination of a family camping trip and my brother's birthday next week, the next update won't be for two weeks.

Coming June 9th: When you're growing up half troll, puberty is twice as hard.

Thirteen Part 1

Chapter Summary

Growth and Hunger

Chapter Notes

Content warning for animal death, animal consumption, and mild gore. I don't think anything in here goes beyond the teen rating, but if anyone strongly disagrees, please let me know and I'll change the rating.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For most people it was no easy task to lift a plastic bucket full of saltwater and poultry, but Jim just had to wait until nightfall and it was a snap.

Jim carefully adjusted the bucket's position and slid the lid of the cooler into place. Tomorrow the turkey would be ready and waiting for roasting.

Turkey prep down, he pushed the cooler into an out of the way corner of the kitchen and got out the cutting board. Time to start on the stuffing. Getting a handful of onions and celery out of the vegetable crisper, he got to work prepping, peeling, and chopping them.

Personally, Jim could take or leave stuffing, but his mom and Toby loved it so every year a bowl of the stuff made it onto the table.

Falling into the practiced rhythm of slicing vegetables with little to no fear of cutting himself, Jim's mind started to wander.

Thanksgiving, like all of their holidays, was pretty small scale. It usually just involved him, his mom, Toby, and Nana getting together

at his house for a shared meal. Occasionally an out of state relative or two of Toby's would drop by, but they weren't particularly close relatives and few ever came twice.

As for Jim and Barbara, all of their extended family had either passed away or were distant enough to be considered strangers, so no out of state visitors for them.

Jim looked down at the blue, stony skin of his knife hand.

It must be hard for Mom to have so little family, but it was probably for the best.

No relatives visiting meant no one coming around and questioning why Jim never left the house past dark. Or worse, actually *seeing* something.

Jim swallowed the lump that suddenly appeared in his throat.

He'd been changing every sunset for so long that transforming was as natural to him as breathing now. It had gotten to be so routine that some days he almost managed to forget how unnatural it was.

But lately even forgetting had become harder and harder.

Jim's hands trembled as he sliced through the celery.

In the past year he'd grown several inches in his normal shape, while his blue form had shot up by nearly half a foot. During the day his

voice had started cracking non stop and at night he suffered from constant headaches as his horns grew in even faster than the rest of him.

But Jim could deal with that; growth spurts that left him gangly and gawky, constant growing pains in bizarre places, sounding like a cartoon character. All of it.

Except for one thing.

Jim slid the finished celery into a large bowl with a lot more force than was needed and started peeling the onions.

From the start he'd never been able to eat normal food when he was blue. But while the things he could eat were weird, they weren't exactly rare. Canceling their recycling plan and occasionally picking up used socks from the thrift store set him up with plenty of night time snacks. So diet was never really an issue for Jim, at least not until last summer.

It had started before then, though when exactly Jim couldn't say, but July was really when it sunk in.

Jim used to be able to go all night without eating. Sure he prefered to have a snack or two after dark, but if they happened to be out of night time 'food', he could just as easily skip eating and make up for it with an extra large breakfast in the morning.

Last July was when Jim realized that he couldn't not eat at night anymore. Even if he did manage to fend off hunger pangs for the whole night, the day after he would be so sluggish and weary that he could barely function.

But getting hungry wasn't the issue.

Jim was bringing the knife down with so much force that it actually started to embed into the plastic cutting board.

The issue was what he was hungry for.

Glass and metal and plastic had always been staples of his nocturnal diet. But a while ago Jim had started craving….different things.

Things he could tear his new, larger teeth into. Things that were chewy and crunchy but also moist and tender. Things that tasted like metal and butter at the same time.

Things an awful lot like the seven pound turkey currently brining in the cooler.

The turkey Jim had barely been able to keep himself from taking a bite out of the whole time he'd been preparing it.

The knife slipped in his hand, catching two of his fingers with the blade. Jim yelped and dropped the knife, which fortunately didn't land on the floor, before quickly grabbing the injured hand and pulling it close to his chest. Once his heart stopped pounding, Jim cautiously pried his good hand off the injured one to examine it.

A long scratch across both fingers but no harm done. It was a good thing that the hand he'd knicked with the knife lacked a pinky, if he had one it would have been badly cut.

Jim took several deep breaths before picking up the knife and going back to chopping the onion.

Jim could handle looking different, he could handle *being* different, but not this.

This wasn't like growing horns or being made of blue stone.

This was wrong.

It wasn't just raw meat he was craving, if it was he'd eat some sushi and be done with it. What he was craving wasn't a cut and cleaned piece of meat, but a whole bloody animal.

What scared him the most was that he knew he could do it. Years of eating metal and leather told him that if he wanted to, Jim could grab an animal, fur, hide, hooves, and all; and just start eating.

What did that say about what he turned into?

Jim dumped the last of the onion into the bowl. He really should work on the herbs next, but if he got out the sweet potatoes, the smell of the sweet, starchy tuber would kill the traitorous stirrings of hunger thinking about the turkey had brought up.

During all the months Jim had been having these cravings, never once had he given in.

And tonight would be no different.

Jim rapidly started peeling and dicing the orange tubers, the smell made his stomach turn but he welcomed it.

Same plan of action as always, work on the sweet potatoes to kill any appetite he had, then force down empty cans and soda bottles to keep himself full for the rest of the night. He didn't have to fight it forever, just until sunrise. Then these disgusting urges would be gone.

At least until the sun set.

Then it would all start over again.

But he could do it, Jim had been fighting his appetite and winning for months now, and he could keep doing it for however long he needed to.

He wouldn't let his nightly transformation change him any more than it already had.

No matter how strong his hunger was, Jim was stronger.

He would fight this forever if he had to.

Loud rustling noises coming from outside jarred Jim out of his thoughts.

Curious, he leaned over towards the window and peeked through the blinds. A flash of movement raced across the compost bin, followed by a loud bang and a crash.

Jim jerked backwards from the window.

What *was* that?

Was it something dangerous?

What if it hurt Mom when she got home?

Despite how much he did not want to leave the house, Jim needed to take the risk and find out if something dangerous was out there. He walked over to the back door and gingerly cracked it open. Just in time to see one of Nana's cats scurry past him and go out through the hole in the fence.

It was the one that actually liked him, he could never remember all their names so he just called it Cat #6.

Looking back at where Cat #6 originated, Jim had to do a double take. The compost bin was laying on its side with the lid several feet away and compost strewn everywhere.

And propped up against the side of the bin was a rabbit bleeding from its neck.

While he watched, not quite believing what he was looking at, the

injured rabbit gave a single twitch before shuddering and going still.

For a few seconds Jim didn't move, slowly realizing what had happened. It wasn't burglars or a roving pack of coyotes causing all the racket. One of Nana's cats got out, got into a tussle with a rabbit, and knocked over the compost bin; that was all. He just had to clean up the mess before his mom got back.

After quickly grabbing a large trash bag, Jim took a few hesitant steps outside and walked over to the compost bin. It wasn't that Jim was scared of leaving the house, he loved going camping and running around in the woods. But being outside in his own backyard, with nothing but a wooden fence separating him from the prying eyes of anyone walking by made him deeply uncomfortable. That was why he needed to clean up the rabbit and the compost and get back inside as fast as he could.

Gingerly, Jim grabbed the rabbit by one of its feet and lifted it off the ground.

He could feel of bone and muscle and sinew move under his fingertips.

The rabbit itself wasn't too messy, the only wound was the one in its neck that had already stopped bleeding, all Jim had to do was put it in the bag and put the bag in the trash can.

The coppery tang of it's blood filled the air.

The smell reminded him of the turkey, rich and briny.

Jim held the rabbit over the open mouth of the trash bag, ready to drop it, tie off the bag, and go back to working on their holiday dinner

But Jim found himself unable to let go.

Stomach churning with unease and traitorous hunger.

What was he doing, why was he even considering this? This was a, formerly, living and breathing animal, not food. He couldn't just eat a bunny rabbit!

Or could he….

Jim glanced around; it was too perfect. The rabbit was already dead, one of Nana's cats had gotten it, that was just nature. So it wasn't like he went out and killed an innocent, woodland creature to satisfy his sick urges.

He was in his own backyard well past midnight so no one would be around to see him….it would be the simplest thing to take a quick bite.

But he couldn't, wouldn't. Jim had been keeping his appetite in check for months, he couldn't screw that all up now. If he had half a brain he'd chuck the rabbit in the bag right now.

Despite every rational argument he could think of, his grip on the lapin stayed firm. Some murky instinct floating in the back of his mind refused to let it go.

The rabbit just smelled too damn good.

Jim took a deep breath.

Just one little bite, that was all it should take to get the curiosity out of his system. Then he would throw it away and go back to chopping sweet potatoes.

Jim raised the rabbit to his mouth, heart pounding, blood rushing in his ears, half of him recoiling in horror and the other half rejoicing, and tentatively took a bite.

Bones crunched easily under his sharp tusks.

They were built for this.

Scorching hot blood dripped down his throat, quenching him in a way he'd never thought possible.

Flesh stretching and tearing in his mouth before landing in his stomach, filling him with complete and utter bliss.

Forget socks and empty bottles and old silverware.

Forget filet mignon and coq au vin and red velvet cake.

This was the most delicious thing Jim had ever eaten in his life.

One bite became two.

Two bites became four.

Four bites became eight.

After eight he stopped counting.

Jim knew he should stop, he should have stopped a long time ago, but he was well beyond the point of caring.

After months and months of fighting back his hunger, Jim was finally indulging himself.

And it felt *so* good.

The world around him narrowed until it just contained Jim and the rabbit he was rapidly devouring. In that moment nothing else mattered. All he cared about was eating more and more and *more* .

Jim was so lost in his feast that he didn't notice. Not until the backdoor light flicked on.

Instinctively, Jim jerked his head up from the rabbit in his hands, swiveling in the direction of the light.

Standing on the back steps was his mom, still dressed in scrubs and lab coat from work, staring at him with wide eyes.

Chapter End Notes

There's not a lot in canon about troll biology, but we do know that all troll populations eat some kind of meat. Either cat meat or, you know, people. Meaning that meat based protein is a nutritional need for them. That combined with troll's ability to eat plastic, glass, and fabric, many forms of which are synthetic materials that didn't start appearing in great quantities until a century or two ago, makes me think that trolls evolved as carnivores/omnivores with the ability to chow down on any kind of animal as soon as they got their hands on it.

As a primarily subterranean race that's made of living stone, I can definitely see trolls requiring a lot more minerals to build and maintain their living stone. And assuming that their metabolisms work the same way other animals do, the energy for keeping themselves going comes from animal fat. So a whole animal would provide a troll with plenty of energy, as well as the added bonus of getting minerals from the bones and teeth.

While Jim was still growing before puberty, he was able to satisfy most dietary needs he didn't get met at night by eating a healthy human diet during the day. However, once puberty started, his growth was too rapid and complex to be sustained by only taking in nutrients during the day. Thus he starts getting hungrier at night and begins to crave sources of energy, animal fat and protein, as well as minerals. And because Jim has no context for this, he is disturbed by his cravings and denies himself the nutrition he needs.

Something that I just realized was that while each chapter covers crucial points in Jim and Barbara's lives, there were a lot of ideas and concepts I had that got cut to prevent to plot from being bogged down. So if anyone wants to get some behind the scenes details on plot ideas that never made it into the story proper, just ask in the comments.

Next week will be the conclusion of this section, I never planned for this chapter to be a two parter, but it was getting so long I had to cut it in half to get it done on time and keep with the flow of

other chapters.

Thirteen Part 2

Chapter Summary

Resolution

Chapter Notes

Content warning for Jim's use of self-deprecating/depersonalizing language, mild gore, and mentions of vomitting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jim froze in place like a deer in headlights; keenly aware of the blood dripping from his chin and the rabbit's foot, all that was left of the rabbit in question, dangling from his teeth by a piece of skin.

Barbara shouldn't be here, she was supposed to work until tomorrow morning, she shouldn't be seeing this.

And yet here she was, staring down at him from the back stairs with her mouth hanging open in shock.

For a few moments neither of them moved a muscle, eyes locked on each other. Then without saying a word, Barbara turned and stepped back into the house.

The sound of the door shutting behind her broke the spell. Jim spit the rabbits foot out into the trash bag and looked down at the blood spattered all over him, overcome with a wave of disgust.

What did he just do?

Jim had kept himself under control for months, *months* ! Why did he

have slip up now? Why didn't he just throw the stupid rabbit in the garbage when he had the chance?

He ate an animal.

And his mom *saw* .

Jim sank to his hands and knees, stomach roiling, digging his fingers into the dirt while he tried to fight a sudden bout of nausea.

How could he have done this? Why couldn't he keep himself under control? He wasn't a wild animal!

Even though he had fangs and horns and blue skin that couldn't be cut with a knife.

But being blue was no excuse, no matter what he looked like he was still Jim.

And Jim had done something inexcusable.

His diet was the one thing he could control at night. The one way he could fight back against the transformation that was forced on him again and again. But the second something slightly tempting had been waved in front of his nose all that had gone out the window.

What he did was disgusting.

Jim was disgusting.

He pitched forward and heaved but nothing came out.

Apparently as a final act of betrayal, his stomach was refusing to yield its ill gotten gains.

Jim stayed like that for a while, down on his hands and knees in the grass, wanting more than anything to undo the past thirty minutes of his life.

After only a minute or two Jim forced himself to stand. He glanced at the backdoor with a grimace before setting the bin upright and starting to pick up the compost that had spilled across the yard.

As much as he *really* didn't want to, Jim had to go back inside and talk to Barbara. There was no excuse for eating the rabbit the way he did, but Jim knew that. He had to explain this to his mom. Make her understand that he knew how disgusting and wrong this was and he'd never do it again.

She needed to know that he wasn't turning into a monster.

The compost was all picked up and put away, he couldn't stall any longer, time to face the music.

Gripping the doorknob with shaking hands, Jim cautiously opened the backdoor and tiptoed into the kitchen.

In the one stroke of luck he'd had all night, Barbara had gone into the living room and was now sitting on the couch facing away from the kitchen. No doubt waiting for Jim to come in so they could have one of their "talks".

She might have heard him coming in, but there was no need to announce himself just yet. Making his way to the sink as silently as he could, Jim tried to wash off the worst of the gore. Despite his best efforts there was only so much that could be done, his hands and face were a lot better now, but his shirt was going to have to be thrown away.

Once he was satisfied that he no longer looked like he stepped out of a slasher film, Jim slunk into the family room.

As much as he was not looking forward to facing his mom after she saw him at his worst, she needed to know why he did what he did.

And that he would never do it again.

Upon hearing him come into the room, Barbara turned and fixed him with a level gaze "So…." her voice was unsettlingly calm "What was it you were eating?"

In that instant every possible idea he had to explain himself flew out of Jim's head.

"I-- it-- it was a rabbit, but it was already dead!" Jim blurted out "One of Nana's cats got it, and then I found it, and I….I was just craving something-- But I'm not ever doing it again! I didn't even mean to do it this time! I heard the bin fall down-- and when I went out to check it the rabbit was right there and--"

“Jim, honey, slow down,” Barbara cut off his rambling “What exactly do you mean by ‘craving something’?”

Wait, had he actually said that part out loud?

Jim’s jaw clicked shut, he suddenly regretted ever having opened his mouth in the first place.

“Honey?”

Jim couldn’t speak past the lump in his throat, it felt like anything he said would just make things worse.

Barbara let out a sigh before taking his hand and gently easing him down to sit on the couch beside her. Then bringing up one hand to start rubbing between his shoulder blades.

Just like she used to do to calm him down when he was little.

Jim found himself relaxing a little bit; both from the touch and the memory. Although not enough to look his mom in the eye.

“Now what’s this about cravings?”

A sickly feeling that had nothing to do with the whole lapin he just consumed spread in Jim’s stomach.

“Well, it’s just that…for a while, when I’m blue, I’ve been craving….raw things,”

“Raw?”

Jim risked a peek at her face, she looked questioning, curious, not horrified at all. But that wouldn’t last long. He didn’t want to imagine how revolted she’d be once she learned he’d been having the urge to chow down on whole animals for months. At this point he’d rather get his fingernails pulled out than continue this conversation.

They sat there in silence, her unanswered question hanging in the air.

After a minute Barbara gently reached over to cup his face “Jim please, I know it’s hard for you to talk about the things that happen to you when you’re blue, but I promise, whatever this is, whatever’s going on, it won’t make me think any differently of you. Nothing could ever do that,”

The shame stirred up by those words compelled him to speak “I’ve been wanting to eat raw meat,” he forced out “But not just like a piece of raw steak or chicken, stuff that still has all the bone and gristle in it….like a whole animal,”

And there it was, out in the open for them both to see.

“How long have you been having wanting to eat things like this?” her tone was even, no trace of disgust or horror.

Yet.

“Since sometime last summer….”

Barbara fell silent, comprehension slowly spreading across her face.

This was it, this was when she would realize how disgusting he’d become in his blue form. She now knew Jim had the urge to chow down on small animals, and rather than fighting it off, had done so at the first opportunity.

Jim tensed and dug his nails into the couch, bracing himself for the explosion that was sure to come.

“Oh Jim, I’m sorry,”

It took a moment for Jim to process what he’d heard, not quite sure he’d heard correctly.

He had expected a lot if different responses from his mom once she figured out the truth; but this wasn’t one of them. Stunned, Jim jerked his head up to meet her gaze.

“Huh?”

Both of her hands came to rest on his shoulders “You’ve been struggling with this for so long and I had no idea….” she looked positively stricken with guilt “Next weekend let’s go to the store together so we can pick out some good meat for you,”

Jim's brain was still struggling to keep up with the completely unexpected turn this conversation had taken "No, it's ok, you didn't….You're not freaked out by this?"

"Of course not,"

"But….but I just ate a bunny rabbit?"

She chuckled "Sweetie I watched you eat the old cable box, it will take a lot more than a rabbit to top that. Besides, we've known for a long time you have different dietary needs when you're blue. It's more important now than ever that you listen to your body and get all the nutrition you need; day and night,"

Hearing his mom laugh caused all of Jim's fear and anxiety to melt away, his mom didn't think he was sick and disgusting for eating the rabbit.

And she was saying….made sense.

Different body, different needs, different diet.

Maybe eating raw, bone in meat wasn't a sign that his blue form was becoming feral; maybe he just needed all the extra protein and minerals to grow.

Now Jim just felt ashamed for keeping this secret as long as he did. He had been so scared of what his mom would think of him that he kept it from her for as long as he could. But she handled it just fine, and now she felt guilty about not noticing what he was going through.

Maybe he should have just come to his mom with this in the first place.

"If you ever start getting more cravings like this, let me know right away, ok?"

He flashed her a smile.

"Ok Mom,"

Barbara smiled right back at him and moved to kiss his forehead, before making a face and opting to pat his cheek instead "But first things first, you need a shower,"

Jim self consciously touched the side of his face.

"Is it really that bad?"

"It's….not very good,"

A shower it was then.

Jim stood up off the couch and made his way to the stairs "I'll go hop in the shower right now, just don't touch any of my cooking stuff, I have a system going,"

Barbara rolled her eyes good naturedly “I know, I know. I’m not supposed to touch anything. Although I’ll have you know back when I lived on my own I was able to cook for myself just fine,”

Jim flashed her a grin as he headed up the stairs.

The secret he’d been keeping for months was out, but Mom didn’t think he was a monster for it, and that made him feel better than he had in a long time.

Barbara waited until the sound of Jim's footsteps going up the stairs faded before getting the Yankee candle out and lighting it.

She gently set the candle down next to the sink, keeping one ear trained on the noises coming from the second floor, carefully listening to the sound of footsteps and doors being opened and shut.

Only when she heard the water for the shower turn on and stay on did Barbara grip the edge of the counter with both hands and take a deep breath.

And then she vomited, spilling the entire contents of her stomach into the sink.

Even after she was done vomiting Barbara heaved for a few more seconds, stomach still roiling even though there was nothing left inside it. Only once she was sure that the spasms had stopped for good did she start rinsing the mess down into the garbage disposal.

When she had first walked into the house earlier that night Barbara had been confused to see knives and cutting boards and bowls of cut vegetables littering the kitchen, but Jim nowhere to be found. Her confusion intensified once she noticed that the back door open and heard some kind of crunching sound coming from the yard. She went out to investigate, but nothing could have prepared her for what she saw out there.

Jim, her son, face and hands smeared in gore, bloody stump of a rabbits paw hanging out of his mouth.

Even after the mess in the sink was all cleaned up, Barbara left the candle burning to finish clearing out the smell. But now she was going to have to do something to cover the smell of the candle. The one they only lit when they were trying to get rid of bad kitchen smells. Otherwise Jim would wonder why she'd been burning it.

Working quickly, she got a small pizza out of the freezer and popped it into the microwave, hoping that the smell of cheese and tomatoes would cover up the lavender scent of the candle.

Even though seeing Jim like that had been the second worst shock of her life, miracle of miracles, she had managed to keep it together and go back into the house. Fortunately Jim’s sheepishness at having his hand caught in the...cookie jar, allowed her plenty of time to figure out what she was actually going to say once he came in.

And now that he was in the shower and safely tucked away for the next twenty minutes, Barbara had time to process exactly what she had seen.

The microwave dinged, signalling that her pizza had finished cooking. Barbara blew out the candle before hurriedly putting it back in the corner and pulling out the cardboard tray from the microwave.

So now they knew, Jim had a craving, and most likely a metabolic need, for whole raw animals. And he'd been having these cravings for months. Months! Jim had been so scared of what she would think of him that he'd practically starved himself just so he could avoid telling her about it.

Now she felt queasy in a way that had nothing to do with watching Jim eat some of the local wildlife.

When she first saw Jim like that Barbara had been horrified, and then guilty immediately after. Jim's transformation had a whole slew of side effects that he had absolutely no control over. She had no right to be disgusted by a new dietary requirement. Jim's nutrition was important, especially now that he was going through puberty.

Jim had eaten the rabbit because his body needed nutrients. Now Barbara needed to help him get foods that would nourish him, but wouldn't expose him to the risk of rabbit fever or rabies the way eating wild animals would.

Regardless of how he felt about it, Jim needed the foods that would help him grow and stay healthy, not just the ones he deemed acceptable. The same way you very well couldn't expect predators in the wild to live on grass and tree bark--

But even though Jim's blue form was strange, he wasn't any kind of...predator.

Or was he?

Eating was the absolute last thing she felt like doing. But when Jim

came back down he would most certainly smell the microwave meal and ask questions if it was untouched. Barbara forced herself to take a seat at the table with her pizza and started nibbling on the edge of the crust.

The instant Barbara first saw Jim like that, streaked with viscera and tearing apart a rabbit with his teeth, the bones not even slowing him down, she hadn't recognized him.

Seeing him like that was so unexpected, so jarring; for a second Barbara had forgotten that she was looking at her son.

Barbara swallowed a mouthful of pizza crust, forcing it down past the lump in her throat.

She was Jim's mother; she needed to support him and take care of him no matter what. If anyone else saw what he turned into--

What he ate.

Barbara didn't even want to imagine what would happen.

She was the only one who knew Jim's secret and helped him keep it. The absolute last thing Jim needed was his mother being repulsed by part of his physiology that he simply couldn't control.

No matter what Jim ate to sustain himself, no matter what he grew into, when all was said and done, he needed her.

Barbara forced herself to take another bite of the pizza.

Jim was her boy, her baby, and she would do anything to ensure that he had the happiest and healthiest life possible. And there was *nothing* that could make her waver on that.

The memory of hearing sinew stretch and tear as Jim tore bites out of the rabbit caused her to gag a little bit before she steeled herself and swallowed.

Nothing about Jim’s nocturnal form would shake her resolve.

Nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Being a doctor, I imagine that Barbara's seen enough blood and guts to not be overtly bothered by them. However the idea of someone chowing down on something she's more used to operating on is more than enough to make her a little queasy.

Coming June 23rd: Barbara's little boy isn't so little anymore, but he's still her baby.

Fourteen

Chapter Summary

The boogeyman cometh.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: Implications of child death and dissection.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barbara swirled orange and pink together, creating the perfect rosy hue.

The balcony outside her hotel room gave her the perfect vantage point for painting the sunset against the Roman skyline. It was so gorgeous that it almost hurt to look at it. And now she was creating a perfect reproduction of this heartbreakingly beautiful scene on her own canvas. She swirled one final bit of color in with the rest, completing her painting.

Barbara gazed admiringly at the canvas, proud to have painted something so incredible.

Jim.

He should see this

Lifting her painting from its frame, Barbara went back into the hotel room.

James was here, lying stretched out on the large bed.

But their son was nowhere to be seen.

“Honey, where’s Jim?”

James gave her a blank look from his prone position “Don’t you remember? He’s at the playground,”

The playground, that’s right.

Barbara went up to the window and looked out. Sure enough there was Jim, navy blue skin a stark contrast to the sandbox he was sitting in. Laughing and playing without a care in the world.

She smiled.

Such a sweet little boy.

Barbara was so caught up in watching Jim that she didn’t notice.

Not until the woman came out of nowhere and snatched up Jim. His giggles stretched out into shrieks of terror as the stranger carried him off.

Barbara’s heart stopped.

No.

This couldn’t be happening.

Not Jim, not her baby.

They'd always been so careful, and now--

She frantically turned towards James "They're trying to take Jim, we need to stop them!"

James just shrugged his shoulders, not moving from his spot on the bed "You wanted him, you go get him,"

Jim's screams echoed from down the hall.

Wasting no more time, Barbara rushed out the door and dashed down the corridor, desperate to catch up to Jim's abductor.

Despite running as fast as she could, the woman was steadily getting further away from her, Jim's wails of distress growing faint.

Barbara ran with all her might, heart pounding, legs pumping; but she never seemed to get any closer.

Then the worst happened.

The woman ahead of her stepped through a door and vanished.

Jim's cries abruptly cut off.

Blood rushing in her ears, Barbara sprinted down the hall as fast as she could, bursting through the door.

It was the anatomy lab, from school.

Fluorescent lights, black countertops, and all.

A group of lab coat clad figures were standing around one of the work tables, blocking the contents of the table from her view.

What was happening here? Why were they all just standing around? Didn't they know what had happened?

"Where is he!" she shrieked "Where's my son!?"

That got a reaction at least. The figures all looked up from whatever they were studying and turned toward her. But they didn't look panicked or alarmed at all….

They looked like they were pitying her.

"Oh honey," one of them spoke up "You really should have said something sooner,"

Barbara felt the bottom drop out of her world.

No.

It couldn't be.

Not Jim, not her little boy.

But the truth was there and she couldn't deny it.

Jim was dead.

Barbara dropped to her knees and let out a primal howl of anguish.

He was dead.

Her baby was dead.

She tore at her hair and screamed until her throat burned.

It was her fault. She should have protected him, but she didn't, and now Jim was gone, gone forever.

Had he screamed, cried out for her. Had Jim spent the last moments of his short life begging for his mother.

A strangled sob forced its way out past her grief stricken wails as hot tears streamed down her cheeks.

She failed him. She had promised Jim that she would always be there and protect him.

And she failed.

And now he was dead.

Dead and gone

Jim, her baby boy, was gone and never coming back.

Barbara jerked awake, eyes snapping open to reveal a dark, unfamiliar room.

Where was she? This wasn't her bedroom? What had happened to Jim?

She scrambled upright, wildly glancing at her surroundings.

As the shadowy room came into focus, it all started coming back to her.

This was a rental cabin right outside Sequoia.

She and Jim were spending spring break here.

Her trip to Rome was over a decade ago and well before Jim's time.

Barbara's breath caught in her throat.

Jim.

He wasn't gone. He was just fine

Her baby wasn't a baby anymore. Fourteen years old, a teenager. Big and strong; doubly so when he was blue.

Not some defenseless toddler that could be carried off by anyone that was so inclined.

Hands only shaking ever so slightly now, Barbara picked up her glasses from the side table and pulled back the sheets.

Jim was alive and safe.

Logically she knew that. The idea that he wasn't had just been a product of the stirrings of her unconscious mind.

But she still wanted to make sure.

Just to shake off the last vestiges of the dream, that was all.

Barbara donned the flannel robe hanging off the of the bedpost and headed downstairs.

While doing multiple camping trips in a year was definitely doable within their budget; Barbara couldn't afford to put a significant amount of cash toward their lodgings. As such, the rental cabin was quite modest; it had four walls, running water, a generator, and not much else.

There was a main level with a bathroom, small kitchenette, and pull-out couch. And while the cabin lacked a proper second storey, there was an upper loft with a small bedroom area.

Jim had claimed the couch as his sleeping area, but while it had been extended and was set up with sheets and pillows, the couch was vacant of Jim.

Barbara’s heart gave a small flutter.

This wasn’t any cause for concern. Judging by the fact it was still dark out, Jim was probably still out frolicking in the woods somewhere. He was old enough by now that she trusted him to roam freely and come back at a reasonable time. These trips were the only time he wasn’t locked up at night, she couldn’t take away from that by trying to impose some kind of curfew.

Jim would return before sunrise, just like he always did on their camping trips, she had nothing to worry about.

A quick glance out the window revealed that while the sky was still pitch black, the eastern edge had started to lighten just a little bit.

Sunrise was still a ways off, so it might be a while before Jim got back.

And there was no way Barbara was going to get any more sleep.

Not after that nightmare.

She found herself wandering into the kitchen. If sleep was off the table, maybe she could be productive instead.

Barbara nervously approached the small fridge. She'd be the first to admit that cooking was not her strong suit. In fact she was so monumentally bad at it that when Jim got old enough to use the stove without supervision he outright banned her from the kitchen.

Swallowing her doubts, Barbara grabbed an armful of containers from the fridge and set them on the counter.

She was an M.D. She had finished medical school with a baby and completed her residency and raised Jim with no help from her deadbeat ex-husband.

Barbara Lake could figure out how to make breakfast.

First things first, simpler was better. The fewer steps there were, the fewer ways something could go horribly wrong. That ruled out anything with a stove or oven, not with the memories of some of her more disastrous cooking attempts hanging over her head.

Barbara planted her elbows on the table and cupped her chin with both hands, staring dejectedly and the stack of supplies from the fridge and pantry.

How could she combine this mish-mosh of random foods into a meal without rendering them inedible in the process?

It took a solid ten minutes of brainstorming before she came up with a good idea. A personal favorite of hers for the rare occasions when Jim didn't pack her lunch.

A parfait.

Just fruit, yogurt, and granola. Something so simple even she wouldn't be able to mess it up.

Confidence surging, Barbara pulled out the cutting board and got to work.

She had a surgeon's hands, slicing a banana and dicing an apple was nothing compared to fishing gallstones out of a bloated torso. So her chopping motions soon became more or less automatic, allowing her mind to wander.

Jim was growing up, no doubt about it. In fact just last month she saw him making eyes at Councilwoman Nuñez's daughter at the hospital fundraiser.

Puberty had hit him like a freight train. He had shot up in height almost overnight, making him as gangly as a scarecrow. Although based on the fact that every time she saw him he was snacking on

something, he would bulk up soon enough.

As with every teenager, Jim rode the hormonal highs and lows as best he could. Mercifully, his voice had finally stopped cracking, although his daily checks for facial hair had yet to reveal any results.

And at night when he was blue, Jim was easily big and strong enough that he could defend himself against a large sized adult man.

God forbid he ever have to.

Fruit all sliced and diced, Barbara got a mason jar out of the cabinet, that was hip, right? And began layering the fruit with yogurt and granola. The finished product was far from the picturesque parfaits found in cafe's and grocery stores. But Barbara was proud to say it didn't look half bad.

Barbara slid her finished product into the fridge. The parfait was all well and good, but she couldn't help but feel Jim needed more protein. He was a growing boy after all.

One that needed whole rabbits and chickens from the farmers market to keep up with his growing.

Dark thoughts surged to the forefront of her mind, stirred up by the earlier nightmare.

Barbara swallowed deeply. Ham and eggs, those were breakfast things. She'd cut up the hard boiled eggs and ham they brought and mix them together. That sounded like a sort of breakfast dish.

Eager for the distraction, Barbara got to work.

When Jim was little, his blue form was more or less the same as his daytime self. Aside from being bigger, stony, and-- well, blue. The stubby horns and and abnormal eating habits were easy enough to overlook.

But everything changed once he started puberty.

Most days it was easier to not think about what exactly Jim's blue form was. They never got any closer to concrete answers so there was no point in speculating. But no matter how much Barbara might prefer to, she couldn't ignore a hard truth about Jim's transformation that, if she was honest with herself, she had known for quite a while.

What he turned into at night wasn't even remotely human.

The oozing sensation between her fingers told her that she had diced the egg into paste.

Barbara wasn't afraid of Jim, she had meant it when she said that nothing about his metamorphosis could never make her think differently of him. Sure some features of his blue form took her by surprise on occasion, but he was her son, regardless of what he….was. She could never fear him.

But that didn't mean she wasn't afraid for him.

Ever since his nightly transformation started, Barbara's nightmares

had been full faceless boogeymen and uniformed thugs stealing Jim away to be taken god knows where and have who knows what done to him.

Those fears hadn’t gone away, probably never would, but Jim's increasingly inhuman physique, what some might call intimidating, added a new edge to her fear.

Oh, Barbara still had nightmares of Jim being kidnapped and taken away, but now they were mixed in with nightmares of him being killed on sight.

Jim wasn’t a monster, never had been never would be. But as much as she wanted to believe different, some people would see him that way.

A few months ago she had walked in on one of the overnight patients watching Beauty and the Beast, in particular the scene when Gaton rallied the townspeople to kill the beast.

It took every ounce of her self control to keep from breaking down right then and there.

Barbara was startled out of her thoughts by the sound of the cabin door opening and shutting.

Quickly, she dumped the sliced ham and eggs into a bowl and went to see who came in.

Jim.

Of course, it wasn't like it could be anyone else, their nearest neighbors were a mile away.

He was back, wiping his bare feet on the mat and shaking leaves out of his hair, carefree as always.

Barbara beamed and stepped forward, arms open in preparation for a hug "Welcome back sweetie,"

Jim looked surprised to see her, no doubt alarmed that she was awake at this hour, but nevertheless returned the hug.

She squeezed him as tight as she could.

Jim had come back, safe and sound.

Not that she had ever really doubted that he would, but it felt so *so* good to have her arms around him again.

"What are you doing up so early mom?" he said while glancing out at the brightening sky. Sunrise was only half an hour away, but it was still ridiculously early

"Oh, I just woke up and couldn't go back to sleep,"

Taking a seat on the edge of the pull out couch, Barbara patted the area next to her and indicated for Jim to do the same.

“Now tell me all about your night,”

Jim shrugged and sat next to her “Not much to say; ran around, climbed in trees, saw some big horn sheep, regular stuff,”

Gingerly, Barbara reached up and plucked a clump of mud out of his hair while eyeing the rest of the mud caked in various patches around his body

Regular stuff indeed.

“Well it looks like you did quite a bit more than that,”

That got a sheepish grin out of him “I may or may not have fallen in the river…while trying to follow the sheep,”

Barbara tamped down the urge to check him over for signs of hypothermia. Jim’s blue form was resistant to temperature changes to the point where he would be perfectly comfortable in shorts and a t-shirt in forty degree weather.

As Jim kept babbled on about the bighorn sheep and his misadventures in following them, Barbara half listened while taking a good look at his blue form.

His nocturnal shape had grown almost exponentially; at this point it wasn’t a matter of if but when he would be taller than her.

More than bigger, he was furrier. While during the day Jim still

couldn't grow anything more than peach fuzz, at night his hair had started creeping around his jaw and down his neck. This lead into the new furry patch on his back that almost exactly outlined his trapezius muscle.

But by and large the most prominent change was his horns. After just a few years of rapid growth, they were now as thick around as fifty cent pieces and had grown sweeping back until they were right above his ears.

Barbara felt a tender smile spread across her face as she ignored Jim's fussing and wiped another chunk of mud off his cheek.

No matter how big he got, Jim would always be her baby.

The first rays of sun peeking through the windows as Jim simultaneously melted down to his normal self. He shivered, now feeling to chill in the mountain air.

She let out a brief chuckle at Jim's plight, earning a pout from him.

"How about you come into the kitchen, I made you some breakfast,"

Jim's petulant face went blank.

"You what?"

"I made breakfast," and did a fine job of it if she did say so herself.

Although judging by the growing apprehension on Jim's face that he was desperately trying to mask, he wasn't quite convinced of that.

Barbara swatted him good-naturedly on the shoulder "Oh just try it, I'm sure you'll be pleasantly surprised,"

"Ok…."

Jim pulled on a hoodie and walked over to sit at the table, nervously eyeing Barbara while she rooted through the fridge.

She set the mason jar and dish of diced eggs and ham down in front of him "Bon appetit,"

Jim was somewhat less enthusiastic.

Slowly, he dipped his spoon into the mason jar and raised it to his mouth.

Barbara held her breath, it would be fine, she'd done everything right, hadn't she?

Jim put the spoon in his mouth and chewed, the look of apprehension on his face melted into one of shock and delight.

"Mom this is really good,"

"Really?"

"Yep," he replied before popping another spoonful in his mouth "It's delicious,"

Barbara practically glowed at his praise while Jim finished his meal.

A good review, from her son the budding chef, maybe she wasn't such a bad cook after all.

Pausing, Jim glanced over to her side of the table "Where's your breakfast mom?"

Oh.

That's right, in her worry about getting Jim's breakfast right she had forgotten to make something for herself.

"Guess I forgot to make one for me, I'll just have a protein bar, "

"No you won't, " Jim stood up "I'm going to whip you up an omelet, "

"You don't have to do that honey, "

"I know," he flashed her a grin "But I want to, "

Barbara smiled contentedly as Jim began cracking eggs into a skillet.

Their lives were hard, harder than most, and it didn't look like things were going to get any easier.

But she wouldn't trade having Jim in her life for anything.

Jim let out a shaky breath as he turned away from his mom to work on the eggs.

He had been caught off guard by seeing his mom up this early. So much so that he was barely able to force himself to act casual. The breakfast had been a pleasant surprise though, not the flavor combinations he would have gone with, but it was the thought that counted.

For a while he didn't think she'd buy his story about falling in the river while looking at the sheep, but it looked like she believed him.

He really had seen sheep last night.

But he'd seen something else to.

Jim had just happened upon an unfamiliar scent during his nightly romp through the woods and followed it deeper into the forest on a whim. He didn't know what he'd been expecting at the end of the scent trail, but what he'd found had shaken him to the core.

It was about the size of a cat, perched on a high tree branch.

Smooth green skin that reminded him of a frog, even though the creature he was looking at was nothing so benign. Long, spindly limbs way out of proportion with its round, fat body. Large, pointed ears and wide mouth with an underbite, too similar to his for comfort, and glowing red eyes.

Curiosity had won out over common sense and Jim had crept closer to get a good look at the creature, despite its agitated hissing. He was close enough that he could have reached out and touched it when he noticed.

Another pair of shining red eyes, staring down at him from up above.

And another.

And another.

Too many to count, extending up into the trees and deep into the dark forest.

All glinting with malice.

The one closest to him made a jumping, rasping sound.

It took him a few seconds to realize it was laughter.

Jim had turned and ran, not even slowing down when he fell in the river, not until the rental cabin was in sight.

His badly shaking hands made him almost drop the omelette before he quickly corrected himself. A quick glance at mom revealed she hadn't noticed his slip up.

Jim didn't know exactly what he had found in the woods, and quite frankly he was happier not knowing.

He plated the omelette and moved to place it in front of his mom, willing himself to calm down.

One thing was for sure, his days of wandering far and deep into the wilderness were over.

Chapter End Notes

Some bad news and an announcement.

I've started my post-grad program, and it's even more intense than I expected. Basically the next six months of my life are going to be absolutely jam packed. While I'm not going to stop writing, my pace will slow to a crawl. Fortunately, I have the rough drafts for the last three chapters written out, so I'm going to try really hard to post them all before season two of 3 Below drops. After which I will be taking a break from writing for a bit.

While this fic is coming to a close soon, there will be a sequel. I'm hoping to start posting it sometime this fall, but with my program I really can't promise anything schedule wise. It might take a while, but sooner or later I will get the sequel going.

Fifteen Part 1

Chapter Summary

> You are my sunshine
> My only sunshine
> You make me happy
> When skies are gray

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: Jim is at a very low emotional point in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jim stood in front of the bathroom mirror, gaze fixed on his reflection.

It was just a little after six in the morning, the square of sky outside the bathroom window was inky dark, but steadily brightening. Barbara was asleep in bed and Jim had already finished his nightly chores and made their lunches for the next day. All he had left to do was wait until sunrise so he could get dressed.

Jim leaned in over the sink, taking an inventory of sorts of his nocturnal features.

Changing every sunrise and sunset had been part of his life for as long as Jim could remember. He wasn't in the habit of closely examining himself at night, normally his metamorphosis was nothing more than an event he planned his routine around.

But today was not a normal day.

Jim tilted closer to the mirror, until his flat, hooked nose was

practically touching the glass; he was taller like this, by at least a foot.

It was Thursday morning, his first week of freshman year in highschool. An ordinary day in most ways except for one.

Today was his fifteenth birthday.

Jim reached up and pinched his cheek, tracking his movements in the glass. He had azure flesh like a granite statue, even after ten years that still seemed the most bizarre alteration.

Jim didn't like his birthday, he hadn't for a very long time. Almost everyone he knew was aware of that.

But what they didn't know was that there was one day Jim hated even more than his birthday.

Jim slid his hand underneath his jaw; sharp tusks jutted out past his lower lip, built for crunching through bone and metal. His fingers slid further back along his mandible into the thick, coarse hair that spread down his neck and back, even starting to line his face in places.

A day just over a month after the date of his birth, a day for which the tenth anniversary was rapidly coming up.

The day he took a bath that changed everything.

The day he transformed for the first time.

His hand traveled up around his pointy ears through the forest of hair on his scalp. Last but not least were the robust, back swept horns the color of ivory. Jim ran his fingers from the base of one horn to the tip, he was pretty sure they were still growing.

Ambient light was seeping into the bathroom at a rapid pace, at any moment the first true rays of sunshine would appear outside.

Jim's reflection blinked, round blue eyes disappeared and reappeared. Those were the same; in spite of everything. His mom had told him that was how she recognized him on the first night when she found him in the woods. Jim had the same eyes, day or night.

For all the good that did him.

Jim could tally up the changes, visible or otherwise, but it never made any difference.

Almost ten years and he still didn't know *what* he was, only that he changed into it every sundown, rain or shine.

And then, from outside the tiny bathroom window, the sun came up.

Jim's otherworldly appearance melted away, the transition was so smooth he could barely feel it.

In the time it took to breathe in and out it was all over.

And then Jim was staring at himself in the mirror; lanky, pasty skin, longish black hair, and no horns or fangs to speak of. The real him, the genuine Jim Lake Jr, standing in the bathroom at six thirty in the morning wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants that were practically falling off.

Jim stood perfectly still, managing to be mystified by the complete transformation even after living with it for years.

He was normal now, he could go outside and go to school and mingle with people, no one being the wiser.

Until sunset, when he would grow and turn blue and sprout fangs and horns and have to stay safely tucked indoors, and the whole thing started all over again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

His life wasn't always ruled by the movement of the sun, Jim knew that. He had a vague memory of walking down the night time streets of Los Angeles, hand in hand with each of his parents.

But all that had gone off the rails when he was five.

Despite his best efforts to think back on that night, on what had

happened to him, the memory was hazy, distorted by time and his own childish abilities of recollection. But no matter how faded and blurry the memory itself was, the terror of it remained sharp and crisp as always.

Splashing around in the tub.

Dropping the dark, grainy sphere into the water.

Being swallowed by darkness.

Waking up in a world that wasn't right.

Mom coming to find him, bursting through the trees and scooping him up, he had been small enough that she could still do that.

Seeing her cry for the first time.

The miracle that happened at sunrise.

The nightmare that came back once the sun went down again.

Jim didn't think he would forget any of that even if he tried.

He hesitated at the mirror for a few more seconds before heading to his room to get dressed.

Ten years.

Ten years of hiding in his house and keeping secrets from everyone he knew. Ten years spent terrified that someone would find out the truth.

What the next ten be like?

Almost robotically, Jim finished getting dressed and gathered up the lunches for him and Toby.

His mom had worked the graveyard shift last night, which meant that she wouldn't be awake until nine or ten, so Jim was all on his own this morning.

Seeing no reason to wait any longer, he put on his backpack and went into the garage, grabbing his bike and heading into the driveway to wait for Toby.

Due to the fact that he was awake at an hour most other teenagers would consider obscenely early, Jim had to wait nearly fifteen minutes before Toby finally pulled up on his bike

"Morning Jim, you ready for day four of our conquest of high school?"

Jim flashed him a smile that he hoped was convincingly cheery "You'd better believe it,"

As they peddled down the street in tandem, Toby excitedly described to Jim his master plan to woo every girl in school. Despite the fact

that he'd never actually had a full conversation with any of them.

Jim rolled his eyes as Toby rattled off three rules of love hunting that he had no doubt made up himself.

Of course *that* was what Toby was worried about, it wasn't like he was dealing with any *real* problems.

Jim had to bite back a snarl. Toby got to enjoy his blissfully normal life just one house over from where Jim was on nightly house arrest; and he didn't even appreciate how good he had it.

The sudden amount of sheer hostility he felt caught Jim off guard, causing him to wobble on his bike, nearly losing his balance. He quickly corrected himself before he could fall and hurried to catch up with Toby.

Jim brated himself while continuing to peddle in the direction of the school, keenly aware of Toby just ahead of him. It wasn't fair of him to be mad at Toby. Toby had been Jim's best friend for nearly an entire decade. Despite all the weirdness caused by his nightly transformation that he *knew* Toby noticed. Would any other kids his age put up with Jim's quirky routine without asking questions? No. Toby was the greatest friend Jim had ever had. He didn't deserve Jim's spite.

They pulled to a stop shortly after passing the large *Arcadia Oaks High School* sign.; hauling their bikes up to the racks out front.

Jim squinted at the steadily rising sun while locking his bike into the rack.

Ten years.

In a month and a half it would be ten whole years of *everything* . All the questions, the discoveries, the fear and horror.

Jim still couldn't quite believe it.

Locks in place, Jim and Toby went inside the building and headed to their lockers, which luckily enough, were practically next to each other.

He thought back on all the nights he practically had to run home to beat the sunset. All the excuses and evasions he had to give Toby. All the close calls.

Of course now that he was in high school, it wouldn't be any easier.

At least when he was little there hadn't been much that he could *do* outside the house without his mom. Now there would be dances and after school activities Jim would have to dodge, no doubt Toby would start asking him to sneak out so they could go to parties. And then once he graduated….

The locker door slipped from Jim's hand as the realization hit him like a freight train.

It's wasn't going to stop.

Not today. Not when he graduated. Not ever.

This was never going to get any better.

A chill slowly spread out from his chest as the cold, hard truth sunk in.

This was going to be his entire life.

Jim was so out of it that he almost noticed his textbooks slipping from his grip too late. Yelping, he quickly grabbed the sliding books, barely managing to keep them from falling to the floor.

“You ok there Jimbo?”

“Oh-- uh-- yeah I’m good,”

Toby looked skeptical “You sure? Cuz I know your birthday always--”

“Yep,” Jim forced a grin “I’m fine,”

Toby didn’t look convinced, but mercifully he dropped the subject.

Jim allowed himself a small sigh of relief at Toby’s lack of prodding, but his bleak revelation still lingered.

They went in to their first class, algebra with Ms. Janeth, and took their seats.

Jim tried to compose himself.

But figuring out the truth had opened up a dam.

He was never going to go to homecoming or prom.

He was never going to live in the dorms or even go to college.

After high school his life was over.

It would be nothing but closed blinds and the same four walls until the day he died.

Jim dropped his pencil as a horrifying vision struck him.

Jim Lake Junior, age seventy, blue skin, horns and all. Living alone in the house he grew up in, never leaving Arcadia. His mom had passed away, he had lost contact with Toby a long time ago.

Jim; isolated and alone.

For the rest of his life.

Jim struggled to slow down his breathing, piercingly aware of Ms. Janeth lecturing in front of him and an entire classroom of teenagers.

He had to keep it together, couldn't break down. Not here. Not now.

Jim dug his fingers into the sides of his desk, trying to stifle the burning in his eyes. He just had to last until lunch, then he could find somewhere to lose it.

The unisex bathroom near the principal's office. It was just a single room with a door that locked so Jim wouldn't be interrupted.

During lunch Jim could go in there, cry his eyes out, scream into a wad of paper towels, and get this all out of his system. That should last him for the rest of the day.

Jim tried to go through the breathing exercises his mom had taught him, but the ugly truth kpet surging to the forefront of his mind.

He was stuck like this for the rest of his life, it was never going to get better or easier, and one day Toby and his mom would be gone and he would be completely alone.

Jim bit his cheek to stifle to sound of a sob coming up.

He couldn't do this. Jim was going to burst into tears in the middle of algebra where everyone could see him.

His fingertips had turned white from the force they were gripping the desk with. He was starting to shake all over, he had to blink every few seconds to keep the tears from spilling out.

Jim needed to pull himself together, *now* .

He summoned up the happiest thoughts he could think of; owning and riding his own vespa, Toby beaming in delight at his latest cooking creation, getting a tight hug from mom….

The guilt he felt every time he lied to Toby, seeing Mom working herself to the bone to take care of him, cleaning the house from top to bottom just to distract himself from the endless hours of solitude every night, spending decades of his life this way….

One of Jim's tears escaped and stained one of the problems on his worksheet.

This wasn't working, Jim was one small spark away from an explosion

Time for plan B. If Jim couldn't make himself happy, then he would have to make himself sad about something else.

And there was only one memory that was potent enough to do that.

His dad.

Jim hadn't cared about that deadbeat for a long time, but the memories of him still hurt.

Jim forced his frantic breathing to slow down while he dredged up

half faded memories from ten years ago today.

Watching his dad come down the stairs, a suitcase in each hand, ignoring Jim's questions about where he was going.

Seeing him get in the car and drive away without saying a single word, only sparing Jim an indifferent glance.

Standing at the edge of the driveway watching the car fade into the distance.

Wondering what it was he did to make his dad stop loving him.

That did the trick, he knew by now that if his dad was enough of a jerk to ditch them, then he and his mom were probably a lot better off without him, but recalling exactly how much it hurt to watch him leave distracted Jim from the hard truth that had chosen this morning to sink in.

It seemed to take forever for first period to end, seesawing between panic and decade old heartbreak the entire time, but at long last Ms. Janeth dismissed them.

Jim let out a shaky breath. One period down, three to go. He could do this.

Restraining himself from running, Jim hurried to his locker, desperate to avoid a conversation with Toby. It would be ten times harder to hide the rising tide of hysteria from him.

He spun open his locker and grabbed his books in record time. Just when Jim was feeling sure that he could make it to his next class incident free, the absolute worst possible thing happened.

A hand shot out and slammed his locker shut, a smirking face framed by blonde hair entered his field of vision "I don't remember saying you could use this hallway today buttsnack,"

Jim had to bite his lip to keep from screaming. Today of all days, Psycho Steve just had to make an appearance.

Hastily, Jim turned and tried to escape down the other side of the hall only to have Logan and Seamus step out in front of him and cut off any escape.

Normally he could deal with Steve throwing his weight around, but not now, not today.

Jim struggled to speak without letting the raging storm of grief and fury inside him color his words.

"I...I've got to get to class, so I can't really do this right now--"

"Oh so you want to throw down later? How does you and me on the football field after school sound?"

Jim dug his fingers into his textbooks so hard he could feel the sharp cover cutting off circulation. Was Steve really that dumb or had he just wanted to pick a fight from the start?

“No I--”

“No backing out Lake," Steve smirked down at him "We're going to settle this once and for all,”

Even though he was two seconds away from a complete meltdown and Steve would no doubt wipe the floor with him, part of Jim, the stupid, stubborn, angry part, wanted to take Steve up on his offer, just to wipe the smug grin off his face.

It wasn't enough for guys like Steve to have it better than everyone else. They had to rub it in their faces.

Jim glared up at Steve’s oh-so self satisfied grin.

Arrogant prick.

Steve had it great; buff, perfect blonde hair, a spot on the basketball team, plenty of cronies to always back him up.

His free hand tightened into a fist.

Steve didn’t turn into a monster when the sun went down, he didn’t spend half his life indoors so men in black from the government wouldn’t lock him up on a secret base somewhere, didn’t have to eat raw meat and metal so he wouldn’t starve. Stupid, *perfect* Steve had it so great, living his nights without fear, no doubt surrounded by tons of friends, actually having a future past graduation--

The unexpected wave of emotion made his eyes sting.

Focus.

Take deep breaths.

Now more than ever Jim needed to keep his cool.

If Jim started to cry in front of Steve of all people he couldn't imagine how bad it would be.

“So what will it be Lake?”

Just when Jim had forced back his emotions enough to give a coherent reply, Toby chose that moment to show up.

“Hey, what's going on?”

Steve scowled at Toby "Mind your own business, buttsnack!"

Toby's gaze turned frosty.

Jim threw a desperate look at his friend, silently begging him to not make the situation worse.

“We're not afraid of you Steve,” Toby followed this bold statement up

with a quick wink at Jim, clearly having misinterpreted his expression.

Steve snarled “That settles it, we’re doing this,”

“No, no we’re not doing anything,”

His birthday, Toby, Steve, *everything,* Jim couldn’t keep himself together for much longer.

A hint of a whine had started to bleed into his tone; he needed to get out of here *now* .

Motions jerky with nerves, Jim darted past Logan and Seamus and managed to make it a ways down the hallway, only to have Steve rush ahead and block him.

Steve was a good deal taller than him, something he used to his full advantage while looming over Jim “No wimping out Lake. You and me, football field, midnight. Be there,”

Steve’s words hit him like a fist to the gut. It didn’t matter whether Jim was willing to fight Steve or not, he couldn’t meet him at midnight if he wanted to.

He couldn’t go to homecoming.

He couldn’t go to a play or a sports game.

He couldn't sneak out to go the end of the year bonfire.

Jim felt whatever tenuous control he had over his emotions slip.

Who was he kidding, his life was over already.

Toby and Steve were exchanging more heated words but it almost didn't sound real. Dim and indistinct, like they were both underwater.

Jim was never going to go to college or even move out of Arcadia, never hold down a real job, never date or get married, never have a family of his own.

Sooner or later, everyone he cared about would leave him and Jim would be alone.

Forever.

The world around him shifted back into focus "Alright Lake, are you in or out?"

A sob bubbled up in the back of Jim's throat.

The hallway was thick with other students by now, all of them could just step outside and live their lives without fear. He was surrounded by people that had no idea what he struggled with every day and never would.

He was lightheaded, his knees were weak.

Jim felt almost like a puzzle piece that had been forced into the wrong spot. Trying so desperately to fit in, but clearly not belonging.

“You going to say anything buttsnack?” Steve sneered.

“Jim can totally take you on,” Toby said, supportive and enthusiastic as always “Right Jim?”

It didn’t matter what he tried or what he did. Jim was never going to have all the mundane, wonderful things that everyone else took for granted.

Jim sank to the ground, stirring up surprised murmurs and gasps from everyone in the crowded hallway.

He’d could pretend and maintain the illusion until he was blue in the face, but that wouldn’t change the fact that Jim was never going to have anything more than half a life.

Toby approached him, clearly concerned “You ok Jim?”

Unable to hold it in any longer, a sob forced its way out of his mouth.

He was doomed, he had been doomed ever since that awful night nearly ten years ago. It just took him that long to realize it.

Tears started to dribble down his cheeks, flushed with shame. He knew this was coming, why couldn't he hold it together for just a little longer? Why did he have to go to pieces here, now, where everyone could see?

Crying in front of the whole student body was a surefire way to doom his high school career before it even started, but then again what did it even matter?

His life was already in tatters, had been for a long time, what was one more thing gone wrong?

More sobs come along with the tears, spilling out harder and faster.

Normal was a pipe dream, something other people got to have and Jim could only pretend at. His life would be ruled by his transformation until the day he died.

Losing any restraint he had left, Jim started sobbing with abandon, regardless of Steve, Toby, and the growing crowd around him.

Through bleary unfocused eyes, he saw his tears start to drip onto the linoleum floor.

Despite all the other teens surrounding him, Jim had never felt more alone in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Only two more to go, and I'm on track to get them out before season two of 3 Below, although one or both of them might not come out on a Sunday.

Remember while this story is winding down a sequel is in the works and will be posted later this year.

Fifteen Part 2

Chapter Summary

Interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With a hiss the last few drops of brown liquid trickled down from the machine, allowing Walter Strickler to remove the pot from the apparatus and top off his mug. The coffee here was swill, but common courtesy prevailed.

Immediately after he was done, Karl stepped up to the counter to refill his own mug “Are you sure you can’t be a moderator for the debate team this semester?”

“Quite,” Strickler replied before taking a sip.

Swill, like he expected, but it got the job done. He headed out of the teacher’s lounge with Uhl following shortly after.

“Are you *absolutely* sure? Bonnie’s retirement left us short staffed, we really need more teachers involved,”

“I’m sorry Karl but I simply don’t have the free time,”

If he took on more duties as an educator, it would eat into the precious time he had for his *other* extracurricular activities.

But Karl didn't need to know that.

"Have you tried asking Lenora? I'm sure she'd be more than happy to help out,"

Uhl's expression turned stony "Have you forgotten the last time she moderated a debate? We nearly had a full scale riot on our hands,"

Strickler caught himself before he could chuckle at the memory. Calling it a riot was a bit extreme, but it had served as a lesson in why a student debate should never be catered with only Hawaiian pizza.

He was about to say something in Lenora's defense with he caught a commotion out of the corner of his eye.

Turning he saw one of the freshmen, James Lake if he remembered correctly, kneeling on the floor and crying.

No, crying was too gentle a word, what James was experiencing was more akin to heavy, gut wrenching sobs that shook his whole body combined with tears pouring out of his eyes and flooding down his cheeks.

He was showing absolutely no sign of stopping or slowing down.

At first he wondered if this was an instance of bullying, certainly wouldn't be the first or last one of his career, but a second glance revealed that the students around him wore looks of shock and incredulity rather than scorn or mockery. More likely than not James was upset by something else entirely, and for whatever reason, was expressing that at the most inopportune moment.

Strickler eyed the steadily increasing crowd of adolescents.

Inopportune indeed.

He looked towards Karl, a look of mutual understanding flashed between the two of them.

“I will see to Mr. Lake, do you think you can disperse the crowd?”

The large austrian cracked his neck “Leave it to me,”

Uhl stormed into the throng of teenagers, some of whom fled immediately upon seeing him approach “Alright everyone, move along, you all have classes to be at so get going,”

Thanks to Karl’s...encouragement the crowd quickly thinned. Allowing Strickler to step in and pull James up by his shoulders, swiftly leading him down the hall away from the other students.

James had to have noticed Strickler's presence along with the fact he was upright and walking, but he showed no outward indication that he was aware of these things. Merely kept on weeping.

After less than a minute of brisk walking they reached Strickler’s office. He opened the door and shepherded James inside.

He let go of James’s shoulders to step back and partially close the

door.

Turning back towards James, Strickler saw that while the teen was still bawling his eyes out, he had taken a seat at the piano stool.

Strickler cleared his throat in hopes of subtly grabbing James's attention.

It was successful, James stifled his sobs to the best of his ability while wiping his eyes and looking up at him.

"Stay here for as long as you need to. Whenever you're ready, come down into the principal's office,"

James kept his composure long enough to meet Strickler's eyes and nod, then it was straight back to sobbing.

Strickler quickly and discreetly exited the room, shutting the door behind him as silently as possible. No doubt the thing James probably wanted the most in this moment was privacy. Checking that the hall was clear of looky-loos, Strickler made his way to the front office.

He was starting to become concerned, the level of anguish James showed was far greater than anything that would be caused by typical teenage drama.

Something significantly more troubling was going on in James's life.

After briefly explaining the situation to Principal Levit, Strickler began

thumbing through the student records. All teenagers had their emotional ups and downs, but an outburst this severe and public at the very least warranted a call to his parents.

Still his mind wandered. What could be upsetting enough to cause a fourteen year old boy to break down in tears in full view of his classmates?

His search was interrupted by the sound of someone bursting into the office; and the sound of the secretary screeching at them about said bursting in.

“Is Jim around? Is he ok!?”

It was another freshman; Tobias Domzalski, often seen in the company of James Lake. No doubt the two were close friends. Maybe he could shed some light on the situation.

“Mr. Lake is just fine,” Strickler cut in, surprising both Tobias and the secretary, the latter of whom looked disgruntled about having lost the opportunity to give a student an ear blistering lecture “He is currently collecting himself somewhere private, although your concern is appreciated,”

Tobias visibly relaxed upon hearing that.

“Oh, ok...that's ...good….”

Strickler seized his opening.

“Do you have any idea why James-- Jim, was so out of sorts?”

Tobias visibly hesitated, showing the look of someone who clearly knew relevant information, but was uncertain about sharing it. No doubt he didn’t want to air his friend’s secrets to a stranger, and an adult at that.

But Strickler had been doing this for years and was nothing if not good at his job.

He relaxed his shoulders and opened his posture, projecting a manner that was reassuring without being patronizing “I know you’re worried about Jim, but if he needs help, any information you can give would be greatly appreciated, and I promise, nothing you say will leave this room,”

It was only a few seconds before Tobias relented, concern for his friend’s well being winning out over a desire to preserve his secrets “It’s just that…today’s his birthday…which was also the day his dad walked out…ten years ago,”

Well that would certainly lead to a public crying fit. Just when he thought that humans couldn’t surprise him with their pettiness anymore.

“Thank you for letting me know,” Strickler gave Tobias a smile that was affable but firm “Rest assured Jim will be fine, now you really should get back to class,”

For a moment it looked like Tobias was about to argue with him. Then he deflated, no doubt deciding that now was not the moment to argue with a teacher, before turning and exiting the office.

Filing away the information he gleaned from Tobias, Strickler went back to looking up Jim's parents-- his mother's contact information.

And there it was, the daytime phone number for one Doctor Barbara Lake.

He wasted no time in punching it into the office phone.

The other line rang three times before a female voice picked up "Hello?"

"Is this Dr. Lake speaking?"

"Yes?" she replied, a hint of a question behind her words.

"My name is Walter Strickler, I'm one of your son's teachers at Arcadia Oaks High School,"

"Did something happen, is Jim ok?"

Well this one certainly didn't beat around the bush.

"Jim is unhurt, but there was a bit of an incident,"

" *A what!* "

Strickler flinched at the shrillness of her tone, perhaps he should have been more specific.

“Jim started crying in the middle of the hallway,” he elaborated “Although currently, he is in my office getting it all out of his system,”

Rather than panic further at this news, Dr. Lake let out a small sigh of relief.

The fact that hearing this caused Dr. Lake to relax rather than rile her up further gave Strickler the courage to prod.

“A friend of Jim’s, Mr. Tobais Domzalski, told me what he thinks the cause of Jim’s emotional state might be,”

There was a brief pause before she spoke again.

“What exactly do you mean?” unexpectedly, her voice had taken on a hard, defensive edge.

Strickler winced, sensing he had ventured into dangerous territory, he would have to choose his next words carefully.

“Tobias made reference to the tenth anniversary of an event that was greatly upsetting for Jim,”

The silence between them stretched out for so long he wondered if the

phones had been disconnected.

“Dr. Lake, are you still there?”

When her words came they held the promise of a coming storm “What sort of event was he talking about?”

Strickler took a deep breath, planning out the next thing he would say to her very carefully. One thing that remained constant throughout his years as a teacher, was that marital issues have been and always will be a sensitive subject “Forgive me if I’m incorrect, but my understanding of what he told me was that this day ten years ago was the day Jim’s father…left,”

The line was silent for a few seconds, then, rather than unleashing a tirade of indignation at him, he heard Dr. Lake sigh in what sounded like relief, oddly enough.

Strickler let out the breath he’d been holding, her responses were difficult to place, but he was happy enough to avoid butting heads with a parent, there was no need to dissect this woman’s motivations right at this moment.

“I….I think I know what this is about. I’ll be there in twenty minutes to pick him up,”

Strickler wasn’t sure if breaking down in tears warranted missing an entire school day, but Jim’s mother obviously knew more about the situation than he did. And he certainly wasn’t going to argue with her.

“I’ll meet you in the front office, Jim will come down and meet you as

soon as he feels ready,”

“Thank you,” for the first time since she picked up the phone, Strickler thought he could detect the slightest hint of vulnerability in her tone.

And then she hung up.

Strickler set the phone down in the receiver and settled into one of the hard, plastic chairs to wait.

He’d been a teacher for longer than most humans had been alive, but certain aspects of it were just as trying now as when he first began, all those centuries ago.

Chapter End Notes

> Only one more to go! Hopefully I'll be able to get it up sometime on Wednesday or Thursday this week. Hope you liked Strickler's perspective, he'll make some appearances in the sequel, but he won't have a major role. I mainly wanted him in this chapter to hint at things going on beneath the surface.

Fifteen Part 3

Chapter Summary

You'll never know dear
How much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara slid the phone back into the receiver, still numb with shock.

She could count on one hand the number of times she received a call like this from the school. While none of them ever failed to send her into tachycardia, the underlying reason for the call was usually benign.

But when she heard Jim's teacher mention him having a breakdown, and then reference a tenth anniversary….

For one brief, irrational moment she thought that he *knew* .

He knew the deep, dark secret Barbara and Jim had been keeping for nearly a decade.

But her fear had been for nothing. The teacher, Strickler, had been referring to when James left them, also ten years ago. And in assuming *that* was the cause of all of Barbara and Jim's emotional upheaval, Strickler was far from alone.

Barbara darted upstairs to get dressed. She'd been in her pajamas eating the omelette Jim had prepared for her when she got the call.

Moving with the speed and efficiency of a surgeon, she pulled on a blouse and skirt before running a comb through her hair and tying it back in a bun.

Barbara hadn't even noticed the date creeping up on her, but now that it had been brought to her attention, she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Ten years.

An entire decade gone by.

Was it possible for something to feel like it happened yesterday and a lifetime ago at the same time?

The agony of seeing James drive away and the unadulterated terror of seeing Jim change for the first time were stark and crisp as they were a decade ago, and yet she could feel the weight of the years pressing down on her. The strain of taking care of Jim and keeping his secret all by herself had certainly left its mark on her psyche.

Barbara allowed herself a bitter smile.

And to think she once thought that James leaving was the worst thing that could ever happen to them.

Dressed and presentable, Barbara grabbed her purse and made her way into the car. One three point turn later and she was heading in the direction of the high school.

Barbara's mind continued to wander as she drove past familiar street signs and store fronts.

A good chunk of the ten years gone by had been spent researching and trying to find a way to cure Jim of his condition. But even after a decade of hard work, all Barbara had to show for it was dead ends.

Finding Sarah Good, the woman that died with the bath bomb in her possession, had felt like the end was finally in sight. All she had to do was contact Sarah's relatives and pump them for information about where the bath bomb might have come from.

What a let down that had been.

Out of the scattering of relatives Barbara had been able to track down, only a few had been willing to speak with her. And of those few, none of them had any idea where Sarah may have gotten the bath bomb.

As far as they knew, the late Sarah Good did all her shopping at Ralphs, and never dabbled in making her own bath products, occult or otherwise.

Barbara blinked back the sudden stinging in her eyes as she pulled into the school parking lot.

As much as it hurt, she was going to have to start planning for a future where Jim's transformation persisted into his adult life.

Parking in the first available spot she saw, Barbara stepped out and

walked into the building.

The conversation she'd had with Jim's teacher less than half an hour ago fluttered around her mind in bits and pieces.

From what little Barbara had heard it didn't sound like Jim's meltdown had been caused by an unexpected metamorphosis.

But she couldn't be sure.

There had never been any repeats of the close call they had back when Jim was in sixth grade, but the possibility was never far from her mind.

They knew now that Jim transformed when it was nighttime, or when he went underground, but there may yet be more circumstances that could cause him to change that they weren't aware of.

Turning the handle of the door labeled with a *Main Office* sign, Barbara stepped into the medium sized waiting area. The only people inside were a stern looking woman sitting at a computer that she assumed to be a receptionist and a tall, slender man with graying hair.

The man swiveled his head in her direction at the sound of the door opening.

"Dr. Lake I assume?" he spoke with a slight english accent, just like the voice from the phone.

This must be the teacher that called her, Strickler.

“Yes that’s me,”she glanced around the room, vacant except for the two of them and the receptionist “Where’s Jim?”

“Still in my office,” he flashed her an apologetic look while gesturing towards the chair across from him “I’m afraid he was in quite a state earlier, it may be awhile before he feels up to coming out,”

Even more concerned now, Barbara planted herself in one of the cheap looking chairs that seemed to be standard issue at public schools.

“I understand you wish to take Jim out of school for the rest of the day?”

“Yes that’s correct,”

Please don’t let him push. She needed to get Jim out of here, in case this was related to what happened to him at night and underground. Just this once, please let her take Jim out of school without poking and prodding into her reasoning as to why.

“Then you should fill out one of these forms and make sure it gets to Principle Levit,” Strickler gestured to a stack of papers sitting on the corner table “Do you need anything else?”

“No- no, thank you,” Barbara replied breathily, relieved at the lack of objections on his end.

“In that case I will return to teaching my class,” Strickler turned and made to leave.

For a second Barbara thought she was in the clear.

Then Strickler paused in the doorframe.

“Forgive me if I’m being forward, but are incidents like this a regular occurrence for Jim?”

Oh no.

“No, no, not really,” Barbara replied, inwardly cringing at how high and sharp her voice was.

Even to her that sounded fake and forced.

Strickler visibly faltered before continuing “I know Jim has only been a student here a short time, but I want to make sure his time here is well spent, I happen to know some excellent counselors and--”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” Barbara cut him off before he could continue this line of discussion.

It was best to nip any talk of counselors or therapy in the bud, She didn’t doubt that both she and Jim could greatly benefit from one or both of those things. But at this point they were just two more things on the very very long list of things that she and Jim needed to figure out how to do without.

Strickler's face wrinkled with a combination of concern and wariness before smoothing into amiable neutrality almost instantly. He nodded back his acknowledgement to her, the silent response almost worse than any verbal one, and stepped out of the office, leaving Barbara alone except for the clicking of the receptionist's keyboard.

She sat in silence for a few minutes, filling out the excused absence form while her mind continued to cycle through all of the possible reasons for Jim breaking down in tears.

What could have made him so upset?

Maybe it really was remembering how James left them, or maybe the *other* anniversary a month and a half away was weighing on him.

Or maybe it was something completely unrelated, maybe Jim was having trouble starting high school. His nocturnal metamorphosis didn't exclude him from all the standard stress of being a teenager; maybe Jim was being bullied

The edges of the excused absence form crinkled in her grip. She should have been paying more attention to him. Jim had seemed fine last night, but people that were fine didn't have crying fits in the middle of crowded hallways.

It only took her a minute to finish filling out form, after that all Barbara could do was watch the clock and wait.

Over half an hour ticked by, Barbara in a fluctuating state of trepidation the entire time, before the office door clicked open and Jim walked in.

His face was smooth and clean, freshly washed no doubt, but his eyes were still slightly red and puffy. Despite the efforts Jim had clearly made to clean himself up, it was obvious to anyone who looked twice that he had been crying.

The fact that Jim had become so good at concealing evidence of tears and emotional distress filled her with a dark, heavy emotion that Barbara couldn't quite categorize.

Jim did a double take as soon as his eyes landed on her.

"Mom! What are you doing here?"

Barbara stood up out of her seat, more than anything she wanted to gather Jim up in her arms right then and there.

But she restrained herself; no doubt Jim was already ashamed enough of crying in front of his classmates. Chances are no one would notice or care about Jim getting hugged by his mother. But he was a teenager now, the rules had changed, and Barbara didn't want to make things worse, even inadvertently. Hugs would come later.

"The school called me," she handed the signed piece of paper to the receptionist, who took it with grudging acceptance "I signed you out of school for the rest of the day,"

Jim opened his mouth and Barbara caught the start of a protest on his lips "No buts mister," she spoke up before he could get a word out "Your mental health comes first,"

His mouth clicked shut, Jim held her gaze for a few moments before looking down to the floor. Part of her expected more objections from him, but there was none.

Jim hated doing anything that singled him out from his peers, things like not being allowed to go to the roller rink party with his class, or bringing a note to school that said he had a condition that prevented him from going underground. That fact that Jim wasn't putting up any sort of fight about being pulled from school in the middle of the day was troubling.

Gingerly, she reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder "Let's go home, then you can tell me everything, sound good?"

Jim briefly met her eyes and responded with a curt nod.

Together, they stepped out of the office and made their way to the entrance of the school. It was the middle of a class period so the halls were practically deserted.

Which was just about the only thing to go right today.

Leaving the halls of Arcadia Oaks High behind, they went into the bright parking lot and walked over to her car.

The two of them got in and Barbara started the engine, but didn't drive away. Maybe it would be better to wait until they were safe at home to grill Jim, but she just couldn't restrain herself any longer. She needed to know just how serious this was.

"What happened?" her tone was frank, and firmer than she intended.

Jim looked down towards his feet “Nothing really…”

“Jim--”

“Really it was nothing!” a defensive edge crept into his voice “Nothing happened to me!”

“Then why were you so upset?”

Jim turned away, once again refusing to look her in the eye.

Swallowing the lump that appeared in her throat, Barbara reached over to give Jim’s shoulder a comforting squeeze.

“Honey, please, *talk* to me,”

Her words seemed to have the opposite effect of what she intended. Jim curled in on himself and for a moment, Barbara thought she’d pushed too hard, then he mumbled out a reply.

“….I ...figured something out….”

Barbara felt her heart skip a beat.

What could Jim have figured out? Another trigger that caused him to change, a previously undiscovered aspect of his transformation?

Whatever it was, based on Jim's response, Barbara doubted it was anything good.

“Figured out what?”

Silence stretched out between them.

When Jim’s reply finally came it was barely audible, but she heard it just as clearly as if he’d shouted it.

“….I’m never going to be normal….”

Barbara’s breath caught in her throat, there was no doubt in her mind about what he was referring to, but she had to ask all the same.

“What do you mean?” she said softly.

Jim looked up at her, looking far more hopeless than any fifteen year old ever should.

“What happens to me at night ...isn't going to get better, I’m not going to be able to go to college or get a job….” his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper “I’m going to be stuck like this until the day I die,"

Her heart broke at seeing Jim look so miserable.

“Don’t say that Jim,” Barbara leaned over and laid both hands on his shoulders “There’s online classes, and jobs you can do over the computer, and I’m still looking into where the bath bomb came from. Maybe one day we can--”

Jim slammed his fist against the dashboard, a move so out of character for him that Barbara jerked backwards, stunned into silence.

“Please. Stop.” his expression was anguished “It doesn’t matter what we do or try...”

He raised a hand and gestured vaguely toward himself “I...I...can never have the same kind of life as Toby or...or...” Jim trailed off, raw agony bleeding into his words.

Barbara’s own throat was tight with emotion, hand outstretched to touch him reassuringly, but afraid of how Jim would respond to that right now. She’d done it again. She was always too quick to offer solutions when what Jim really needed in the moment was to be sad and angry for a while.

But this was more than that.

It wasn’t as though Barbara never thought about college or Jim’s future, but sometimes it got hard to focus on anything that wasn’t immediately pressing. Although the idea of online classes had crossed her mind a few times.

Now that she thought about it, even if Jim could get some kind of degree that way, and she wasn't sure that he could, what could he *do* with it?

Most jobs that let you work from home still had interviews, and Skype meetings, and *something* that demanded an occasional appearance at night.

Barbara needed to say something, reassure him; let Jim know that his future wasn't as bleak as it seemed.

So why couldn't she think of anything?

"I won't go to college...I...I can't get a job," Jim said, voice thick with the promise of tears "Toby will move away, and I'll be alone after you...you…"

It was in that instant that Barbara understood what had caused Jim to breakdown for the first time today.

After that Jim gave up trying to say words, merely curling up on the passenger seat, starting to shiver with barely restrained sobs, tell tale shine of tears in his eyes.

Barbara was frozen in place, still reeling in shock as her son dissolved into sobbing for the second time that day.

As much as she wanted to deny what he said, tell him that he could still live a rich, full life, she couldn't. That wasn't even a lie she could tell herself anymore.

Barbara watched Jim shudder and heave with the force of his cries on the seat beside her. Her own eyes started to burn with tears.

It should have been her.

The thought came out of nowhere, but the truth in it resonated in her bones.

They were her goddamn bath bombs in the first place, she should have been the one that used it and started changing every night.

Barbara was an adult, even ten years ago she'd been an adult. She'd had her childhood, her adolescence, her fun filled years of youth. She could have coped with her adult life being truncated.

Her breaths were shaky and uneven. From behind her glasses. tears built up until they began to fog her lenses.

But that wasn't what happened.

Jim had been the one in the line of fire, he was the one who had his life cut short before he could even start living it.

And it was all Barbara's fault.

She smothered a sob into a sharp whimper.

Why had she even given him the bath bomb in the first place?

Cold spots appeared on Barbara's cheeks, letting her know that her tears had started flowing past her eyelids.

Jim was going to be trapped living half a life and there was nothing she could do to change that.

No matter how much Barbara worked or tried. No matter how much she loved Jim and poured her heart into taking care of him...it wouldn't be enough.

And after she died he would be all alone.

That thought finally snapped Barbara out of her stunned paralysis. She jerked towards Jim with both arms outstretched and wrapped him in the tightest hug possible.

"...I'm so sorry Jim..."

Jim squeezed his own arms around her just as tight, openly bawling against her shoulder.

Barbara was crying in earnest right along with him.

Her own tears trickling down and dripping onto his hair.

In all her life she'd never felt so powerless.

Barbara had always tried to present a strong front to Jim, someone that he could always rely on for support and grace under pressure, but what was the point now?

The future ahead was dark, they both knew it, what was the point in pretending any different?

"...I'm so...so…"

Barbara couldn't form words anymore, she was crying too hard. But then again what did it matter? Nothing she said would make a difference.

Jim had passed that point a long time ago, forgoing any attempts at verbal communication, instead clinging to her like a drowning sailor to a life raft, weeping with abandon.

It was just like that first night, nearly ten years ago.

Both of them caught in a maelstrom of fear and hopelessness, hanging on to each other with all their might.

But this time Barbara knew the sun wasn't coming up.

The nightmare was here to stay.

Barbara dug her fingers into Jim's jacket in an effort to hold him even tighter, as if by holding him close enough she could protect him from all the worst life could throw at him.

Anything was better than admitting to herself that nothing she did

was worth a damn.

Even after everything they had been through; the heartbreak, the horror, the fear, solitude, and misery, Barbara and Jim were right back where they started.

Jim continued to sob against her shoulder, tears beginning to dampen her blouse, while Barbara held onto him with all of her strength, her own tears and wails spilling out unmuffled. She was twisted halfway out of her seat and the parking break was jabbing into her side, but none of that compared to the anguish of imagining the distance between her and Jim growing even a just a little.

All they had was each other, and that just wasn’t enough.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap.

First off, I want to thank everyone that left comments or kudos. You guys have no idea how much it means to me to see you enjoying my fic. You are all the best!

While this work may be done, the story is not over. I am writing a sequel that will posted starting in the fall. I don't want to give too much away, but I will let you know that in the sequel Toby and others will find out about Jim's nightly transformation, and the full explanation as to how the bath bomb of doom came to be will be revealed.

Until then, I'm going to be taking a short break to get caught up and watch the second season of 3 Below.

See you soon!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!